

VOLUNTARY ACTION AND GANDHIAN APPROACH

D. K. OZA







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and
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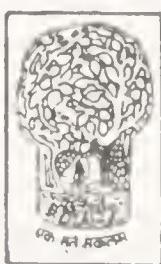
Young India Library

Voluntary Action and Gandhian Approach

(A Study of Three Voluntary Movements in India)

D. K. OZA

Illustrated by
Santhana Raj



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Preface

This book is a result of my wanderings in remote areas of the country and the study I made of three voluntary movements in India during 1987-88. The 'Chipko' movement took me to the Himalayas where I go every year; it is an addiction. The movement of Baba Amte drew me to him and gave me a chance of seeing some of the finest forests; and the SEWA movement took me to the severely drought-stricken areas of Gujarat during the hottest months of the year. What I saw and learnt has been presented in this book. I greatly value my experiences since these took me away from the routine of a government official's life.

This book is addressed primarily to the young people of India whose sense of adventure and idealism is the only hope for more such voluntary action in future against unsavoury acts towards man and Nature. Even though the study is based upon research, it avoids technical terms and the inevitable use of difficult words. To help me in this study, I was formally attached to the Gandhigram Rural Institute, a Central University located near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Shri Devendra Kumar, its Vice-Chancellor and Dr R. Subramanian of the Faculty of Rural Development have helped and guided me in the use of research methodology for my work. I am grateful not only to them but also to Shri Padmanabhan, Chairman of the Gandhigram Trust.

Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna and Shri Dhoomsingh Negi have helped me immensely. Shri Murarilal, Shri Anusuya Prasad and Shri Chakradhar Tiwari are the other Chipko

activists who toured with me in the Himalayan districts. Baba Amte and his family showered me with affection and hospitality which was an unforgettable experience in itself. Smt Elaben Bhatt and her dedicated colleagues—Smt Renana Jhabwala, Smt Lalitha Krishnaswamy, Smt Usha Jumani, Smt Anila Dholakia and many others gave me a great deal of help. Shri Anupam Mishra of the Gandhi Peace Foundation at Delhi, Shri Krishnamurthy Gupta of the Himalaya Sewa Sangh, Shri M. Krishnan, renowned naturalist, and Prof Devavrat Pathak of the Gujarat Vidyapeeth have also been very kind to me.

Prof K.G. Rama of the Stella Maris College, Madras, rendered valuable help in the preparation of this book, and my friend, Shri Santhana Raj, the artist, who has illustrated this book has contributed his very best to make this book lively and attractive.

I hope that this book will encourage some young people to take to voluntary work to give expression to their desire to do something concrete for the fulfilment of their ideals.

Gandhigram
April, 1991

D. K. OZA

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I

The Example of Mahatma Gandhi

"I have not conceived my mission to be that of a knight-errant wandering everywhere to deliver people from difficult situations. My humble occupation has been to show people how they can solve their own difficulties."

— Mahatma Gandhi

This book is a study of three voluntary movements in India which have shown spectacular results in bettering the lives of the underprivileged. The first movement is called 'Chipko', which in Hindi means "to cling". The movement got its name when men and women—more particularly the women—of some districts in the sub-Himalayan region took to clinging to the trees, challenging the men who had come to cut down their magnificent forest. This movement, started twenty years ago, in 1971, was first inspired by the perception that the people must organise themselves to save Nature, trees, water, air and the environment from degradation.

The second movement is that of Baba Amte, in the north-eastern part of the State of Maharashtra. This was started about fifty years ago as a campaign to help those who suffered from the dreaded disease of leprosy; to rehabilitate them and to remove the horror and stigma which society attaches to this disease. The movement is no longer confined to the problem of leprosy but has acquired many other dimensions.

The third movement is called the Self-Employed Women's Association, in short SEWA. The word 'Sewa' means "service". Shrimati Ela Bhatt, dedicated to organising the poor self-employed women in the cities and the villages of Gujarat State, started this movement. It has now spread to other parts of India and has been engaged in tackling a variety of economic and social issues.

All these three movements have sprung from the voluntary initiative of the people, even though they get varying degrees of support from the government and national and international institutions. However, they continue to rely strongly on the participation of men and women from the underprivileged classes of society. All the three movements are inspired, again in varying degrees, by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. To understand his personal philosophy which provided the impetus to these movements, it is necessary to learn not only of Gandhiji's ideas but also about him. It is not possible to separate his life from his teachings because he lived what he taught. Therefore, attempt has been made to narrate Gandhi's life in such a way as to interweave his personal qualities and his philosophy into the fabric of his life-story.

Mahatma Gandhi was born in a religious middle-class Hindu family in the year 1869, at Porbandar, the erstwhile capital of a small princely State in the Kathiawad region of Gujarat. His given name was Mohandas. He was not a very bright boy at school. He was married off when he was no more than a boy. In his early life as a married person, like everyone else, he tried his best to "play husband and the boss". As a young adolescent he committed minor indiscretions like stealing, and, much worse, eating meat, which was regarded as a horrifying sin in the culture to which he belonged. Once he saw a play being staged on the life of King Harishchandra who was willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of truth. The performance left a lasting impression on Gandhi's mind.

After an ordinary academic career, he was sent, in 1888, to England at the young age of nineteen, to acquire the much coveted degree in law. During his three years in England, he did nothing striking, except attending meetings of vegetarians and doing a certain amount of basic but vague thinking about life and its purpose.

In 1891, after three years of stay in England, he came back to India with a degree in law, tried to work as a lawyer in India but soon discovered that he would have little chance of success here. That is why, when he got an unexpected offer to go to South Africa to help an Indian business firm with some important legal matter, he immediately accepted it.

At that time many Indians had gone and settled in South Africa. There were Gujaratis, Muslims and South Indians—professing different religions, i.e. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. A great many of them had been there for many years, under a system called "agreement" which was called by the Indians 'girmeet'. This system of "agreement" was very similar to serfdom or bonded labour. It compelled the labourers who had signed the "agreement" to work on the fertile farms of South Africa under white masters for a specific period of time. Sometimes these labourers were treated unfairly and even brutally. The way in which they were addressed was also very undignified. After the "agreement" period was over, they could do what they chose, but such freedom was of little use to them in a society which regarded the non-whites as inferior and capable of doing only menial jobs.

Since the whites dominated the administration and the government of South Africa, the non-whites suffered from colour bar in many ways. It is this colour bar which is now called 'apartheid'.

Being a non-white, Gandhi himself had several shocking experiences. He personally suffered discrimination, insults and even injury. However, his personal experience did not frighten him. He did not become bitter, nor did he develop

hatred or ill-will against the white people. But, when he saw similar treatment of non-whites everywhere, his love for justice and equality compelled him to start fighting against this kind of tyranny. Thus, while trying to become a professional lawyer, he displayed, at the young age of twenty-six, the characteristics of a leader of the oppressed.

He organised the Natal Indian Congress in 1895. During this time he came into contact with Balasundaram, a Tamil Indian labourer, who had been treated brutally by his white master with whom Balasundaram had a work "agreement". Gandhi took up Balasundaram's case and this made him famous. Gandhi pleaded Balasundaram's case not merely from the legal angle but also on the ground that every human being was entitled to be treated with dignity. He strongly disliked inequality and oppression. Here it would be interesting to note that the lawyer and the client could not communicate directly with each other, as Gandhi could not speak Tamil and Balasundaram could speak neither Gujarati nor English—the two languages which Gandhi could speak.

In 1896, Gandhi came back for a visit to India and met some of the Indian leaders. While in India he wrote extensively about the plight of Indians in South Africa. However, the same year he had to rush back to South-Africa on urgent summons. By this time Gandhi's activities were beginning to be disliked immensely by some white men. When his boat reached Durban, he was advised by two friendly Englishmen to be extremely careful while getting down from the boat because some white men were "waiting" for him. As was to be expected, he was soon recognised by a small, angry crowd. He was cunningly pulled away from a courageous white friend who wanted to stand by him. He was then beaten. At personal risk, a young white woman protected him from further beatings. She was Mrs Alexander, wife of the English Superintendent of Police. Eventually Gandhi was saved. Later some of his white friends advised him to get the assailants punished

but Gandhi, being a believer in forgiveness, did not care to do so. It must be said that many Englishmen living in South Africa stood for justice and fair play. Because of their beliefs, they also became friends and admirers of Gandhi. Some of them became his co-workers. This was not easy for them. They were despised by their own people for sympathising with Indians. It required a high degree of moral courage to defy the prejudices of their own kinsfolk and sympathise with those considered inferior and alien to the superior culture of the whites. Gandhi's white friends displayed such courage in ample measure. Gandhi's first biography was written by a white friend and admirer, Reverend Doke, who at one time nursed Gandhi back to health in his own home.

Gandhi rapidly emerged as the acknowledged leader of all Indians living in South Africa. Throughout his life, Gandhi never made any distinctions among people on grounds of religion or language. One of his lifelong friends was Mr Kallenbach, a person of Jewish faith and an architect by profession. He remained Gandhi's friend forever and visited him in India several years later. Gandhi respected all religions equally although he himself was a devout Hindu. In his legal work he stood by truth and often advised even his clients to lose a case rather than win it through falsehood. The judges before whom he appeared were invariably impressed with this love for truth and his fairness to the opponents.

All his life Gandhi was guided in his actions by a strong sense of duty. In 1899, he became a leader of a team of Indian medical volunteers and helped the British in South Africa in a local war. Such work required physical courage and qualities of leadership which Gandhi had in ample measure.

In 1901, he came back to India and as a volunteer, organised a campaign against plague which was then prevalent in Rajkot, a town in western India. He stayed only for a short time in India. However, he was drawn to

the national movement and attended the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress. He also travelled all over India, always choosing the lowest class in the Indian railways.

In 1902, he went back to South Africa and started publishing a periodical named the *Indian Opinion* to voice the feelings of the Indian community. He experienced serious difficulties in running this magazine but persistence, in the face of difficulties being a part of his mental make-up, helped him with its publication.

In 1904, he studied the great Indian classic, the *Bhagwad Gita*. He also studied another book *Unto this Last*, written by Ruskin, the English philosopher. It was this book which strengthened his conviction that the good of the individual lies in the good of all. He has devoted a separate chapter in his *Autobiography* to *Unto this Last* and its profound influence on him. The day after Gandhi read the book he discussed its influence on him with his close friend, Dr West, an Englishman. The discussion centred around how to translate into practice the principles he had learnt from the book. Immediately thereafter he started the first of his *ashrams* at Phoenix in South Africa. An *ashram*, commonly understood as a retreat or a monastery, was for Gandhi, a mode of communal living by a group of persons sharing a common quest for truth and guided by certain common moral principles. In his *ashram* at Phoenix he was joined by some Indians and a few non-Indians who respected him for his principles and loved him for his straightforwardness. Earlier, Gokhale, the Indian leader, had toured South Africa and Gandhi had acted as his host. Gokhale gave Gandhi a model of what a public figure should be, and later Gandhi acknowledged Gokhale as his political *guru*.

In 1906, he again acted as a medical volunteer during a revolt in South Africa. It was in this year that the famous word *satyagraha* was coined. There is interesting history behind this word and its significance. The simple meaning

of the word is "insisting upon truth and adhering to it." In practice, however, it means that one must resist injustice and oppression and while doing so, try to persuade the oppressor to give up his ways. Such persuasion should be based upon love since in *satyagraha* there is no place for hatred or fear of the oppressor. The struggle against injustice must be non-violent and the *satyagrahi*, i.e. a person who practises *satyagraha*, must be ready to give up his life without even trying to hurt the opponent. This is the philosophy which Gandhi exemplified. His principal teaching to the world was: "Resist tyranny with all your might but try to win over the tyrant with love. Do not ever surrender to oppression but do not, in your heart, have any hatred for the oppressor. Hate sin but not the sinner. Follow truth wherever it takes you and if this means you have to sacrifice your life, do so without fear."

In 1907, he offered *satyagraha* against racial discrimination. Subsequently he reached an agreement with the Government of South Africa but later felt deceived. So he restarted the *satyagraha* and went to jail. At that time he got in touch with the great Russian, Count Leo Tolstoy in whom he saw a kindred spirit, dedicated to the principles of love, truth and justice—values which he himself cherished. In 1909, he wrote his first book *Hind Swaraj* or "Indian Home Rule". This book is in some way basic to understanding his personality. It chiefly contains Gandhi's views about degradation brought to India by modern civilisation. Many people thought that Gandhi would later change the opinions he had expressed in this book; but, Gandhi reaffirmed these views many years hence.

In 1910, he started another *ashram* named after Tolstoy on the outskirts of the city of Johannesburg. In 1913, he again offered *satyagraha* and went to jail. In 1914, the *satyagraha* succeeded and an honourable agreement between the Indian community and the South African Government was reached.

In 1914, Gandhi returned to India, never again to go back to South Africa. Thus, an important phase of his life

came to an end. His struggles in South Africa moulded many facets of his personality and, through it, he emerged as a leader, a humanist, a thinker, a seeker of truth and, above all, a servant of mankind.

At the time of the First World War which started in 1914, he helped the British Government in India by encouraging Indians to join the army. He worked so hard for this that he was taken ill due to exhaustion. In 1915, the British Government awarded him a medal in recognition of his work to help the war effort. While appealing to the Indians to join the British army, he publicly declared that by joining the army, Indians could learn to use the weapons which they were generally not allowed to use. In their letters to him, some of his close friends criticised Gandhi's advocacy of the war effort. Gandhi however defended his position.

At this time Gandhi was trying to familiarise himself with India. In 1917, a young man called Rajkumar brought to his notice that some extremely poor peasants in Champaran district of Bihar State were working under intolerable conditions. The white landlords had imposed an illegal condition on their Bihari tenants to grow blue indigo, a commercial crop, in part of their holdings. This crop gave substantial profits to the landlords only and subjected the tenants to exploitation. Initially Gandhi was not interested in this complaint because he thought that it was too improbable to be true. Eventually, however, he agreed to visit the district, but made it clear that he would make his own enquiries before doing anything.

During his visit to Champaran, he soon discovered that the tenants were in fact being exploited. Those tenants who resisted the landlords' demands were often treated ruthlessly. The arrival of Gandhi in the district encouraged a small group of young nationalists to rally round him. As a matter of principle, Gandhi first conducted a thorough enquiry and collected a lot of evidence with meticulous care. He then led a *satyagraha* which was a complete

triumph. This was his first *satyagraha* in India and it was an important landmark in his life. It made him an acknowledged leader of the national movement in India.

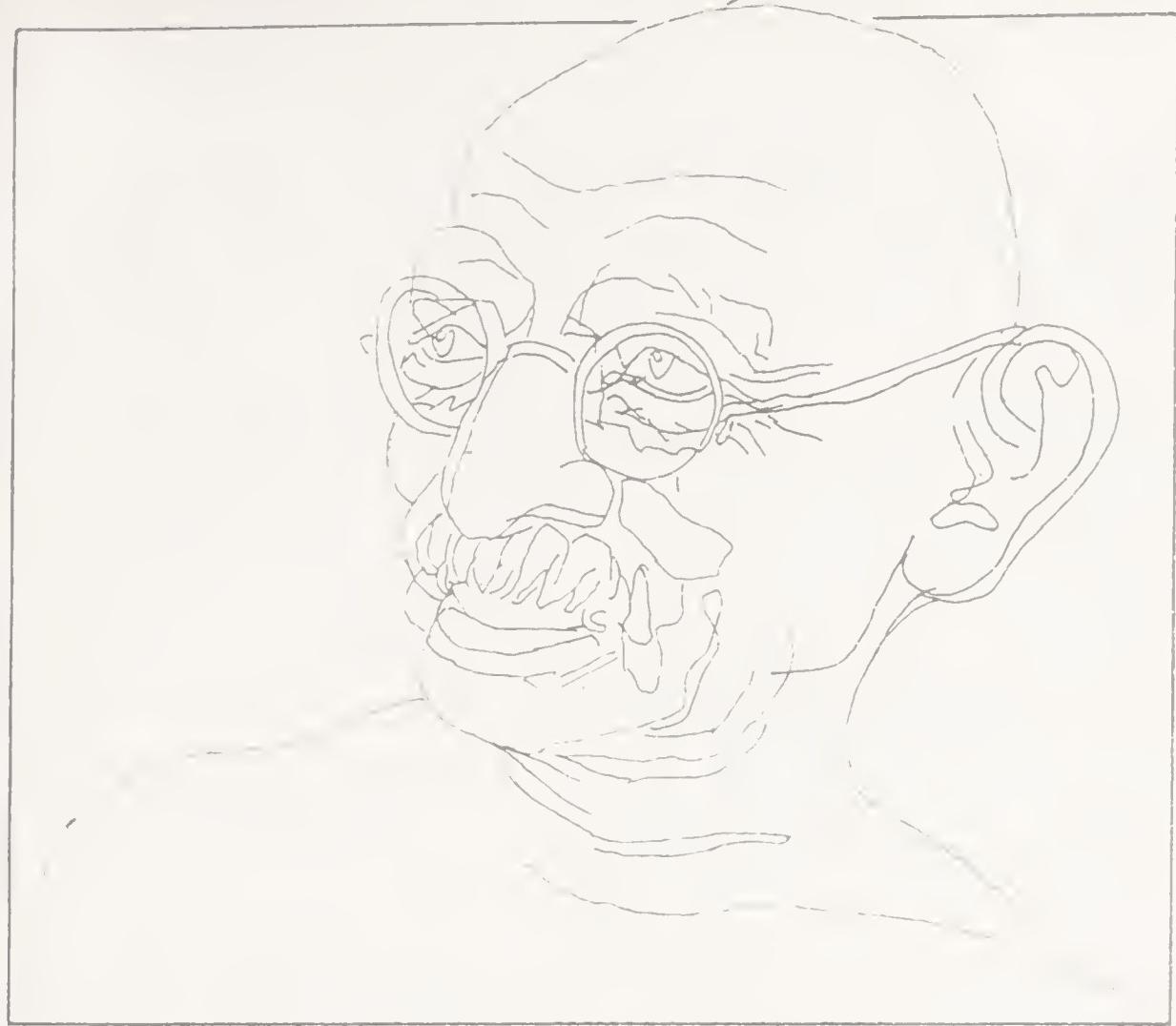
In 1918, he led the workers of the textile mills in Ahmedabad in an industrial strike and later offered *satyagraha* to support the farmers in a neighbouring district of Gujarat. It was at this time that he discovered the potential of the spinning wheel as an answer to the chronic unemployment and poverty afflicting the Indian masses. He urged upon the people to spin their own yarn and wear cloth made out of it. It was this cloth which became popular as *khadi*. He advocated this and some other village industries throughout his life. He looked upon India as a country made essentially of villages. In 1919 he started two journals called *Young India* and *Navjivan*. He maintained very high standards of journalism and used these journals to propagate his message to the masses. Any student of modern Indian history will profit by reading the old issues of these journals containing Gandhi's own authentic writings. The journals are an excellent commentary on the economic, political, and social picture of the times.

In 1922, Gandhi started a non-violent movement. However, the people were so incensed by the behaviour of the police that they turned violent. He promptly suspended the agitation in the face of angry protests by his colleagues and followers. His acceptance of non-violence and truth was so total that he found it intolerable that violence or falsehood should be adopted to promote a cause dear to him. He believed that only the right means could achieve the right ends. He often said: "Means and ends are the same." He could never persuade himself to believe that by adopting foul means anyone could achieve a worthwhile objective.

In 1930, he launched his famous 'Salt Satyagraha', urging the British Government to withdraw the levy on salt. He had a sense of the dramatic and he saw that an



The frail Gandhi in his loin cloth during the Dandi March.



(Top) The frail but keenly alert Mahatma Gandhī.

(Bottom) Spinning khadi and setting an example.

issue like tax on salt would fire public imagination. He found this levy totally unacceptable. When his request for abolition of the tax was turned down, he exhorted his countrymen to "make salt without paying the tax", and thus defy the government. He led a long march to the seashore where he himself collected some salt. This was the historic Dandi March. A great many men and women joined him in this defiance of an unjust law at Dandi and other parts of the country. Moreover, the non-violent *satyagraha* itself drew the world's attention to the novel way of fighting injustice and oppression. He wrote: "I want the world's sympathy in this struggle of right against might." The *satyagraha* itself failed in achieving the objective but it succeeded in galvanising the nation.

Gandhi was not a political worker only; he was also deeply concerned with various social issues. He was convinced of the need for far-reaching changes in social relationships. He considered untouchability a sin against man and God. He often chose to stay in the humble huts of the poor and the despised to identify himself with these outcasts of the society. He once said that if he were to be born again, he would like to be born as one of the oppressed to feel and share their agony. He coined the word *Harijans* for the people who suffered indignity from society. The word 'Harijan' actually means the children of God. He demanded complete equality for these people. His several campaigns in favour of these outcasts shocked some conservative Hindus but the moral force behind these campaigns was so great that a large number of people changed their attitudes towards the Harijans and even allowed them access to the Hindu temples.

In 1933, he started a journal to express his views on social and political affairs. He chose to name it the *Harijan*. Because of his unhappiness at the inferior status accorded to women in India and also his tremendous faith in them, he publicly declared that women "are every bit as good and competent as men." In fact, he accorded women a

higher status in his scheme of things, without unduly sentimentalising the issue. Many women were instinctively drawn to him and committed themselves to work with him.

He abhorred religious fanaticism. He once said that there was no sin like ill-treating defenceless people in the name of religion. Throughout his public life, his followers were drawn from all religions. He firmly believed that all religions affirmed the same truth. He went on record to say that "one's religion is one's private affair." The State had no business whatever to dictate in matters of religion. He wanted complete separation of religion from the State. He struggled all his life to create amity between Hindus and Muslims. It pained him immensely when communal riots broke out and innocent people suffered. The last few months of his life were spent in trying to heal the wounds of those who had suffered from religious violence. His death also came as a result of his stubborn refusal to bow to religious bigotry.

In 1942, Gandhi led India's last nationalist agitation to urge the British to quit the country. Independence came to India in 1947 but the country had to be divided into two separate nations—India and Pakistan. This painful division was the result of age-old animosities between the Hindus and the Muslims which had certain historical roots. He had tried most of his life to build a bridge of understanding between the two communities, and for short periods, he was able to create a feeling of shared purpose and a common future between the two. But, the hatreds were too deep rooted to be overcome easily. Religious fanaticism has a powerful appeal and many on both sides succumbed to it. The result was that the British and the Indian leaders agreed to the partition of the Indian sub-continent. This partition was accompanied by a great deal of bloodshed. Lakhs of people on both sides of the Indo-Pak border were uprooted and became refugees. This broke Gandhi's heart. He lamented that all he stood for in his life had collapsed

completely. He suffered a deep sense of inner defeat. Something inside him snapped and he exclaimed: "I see darkness all around me." It was this communal frenzy that ultimately led to his assassination in January, 1948.

Gandhi was a fascinating personality. Despite his physical frailty, he was able to put in prodigious amount of work everyday. He could bear physical hardships without murmur. He could walk long distances and could do with very little sleep and food. As a man he was completely fearless and he tried to teach this important virtue to his fellow-men. His fearlessness came from two basic characteristics of his personality: his love for truth and his completely impersonal outlook on life. He never cared about what would happen to him. He had imbibed a religious principle that while the body will perish, the soul is immortal. This belief gave him supreme courage. He was not afraid of physical injury or going to jail or even of death. In fact, those who shared his *ashram*—life had to take eleven vows, one of which was of complete fearlessness. We must also note another important vow which he took and shared with others: it was recognising the dignity of physical labour. This principle he picked up from Tolstoy who had called it "Bread_Labour". He taught not only the dignity of physical labour but also the indignity of laziness.

His personal needs were very few and he became completely one with the poor. He once said that he was shocked to see the indifference of the educated in India to the plight of the poor. Mirabehn, an Englishwoman, who became his disciple, once asked him to write a special prayer which she could recite every day. He wrote: "O God, you are the ocean of humility. You live in the huts of the poor and the outcast. Give us the strength to find you in this holy land where the Ganga and Yamuna flow."

He loved children and enjoyed playing with them immensely. He was a lovable and cheerful man with a refined sense of humour. When he entered a room full of

people, he would invariably lighten the atmosphere with some light-hearted remark, often at his own expense. This light-heartedness was in contrast to the solemnity of "important" people who are usually preoccupied with themselves.

He had a personal philosophy which was simple in the extreme: "We must act and act continuously because that is our duty. But we should never expect the fruits of our action." He called this the 'Anasakti Yoga' or "the philosophy of non-attachment" and believed that this was the central teaching of the *Gita*. He has himself written a short commentary on the *Bhagwad Gita* and in the lucid preface to this small book, he has explained this philosophy.

He unfailingly adhered to certain other principles as well. He had an unshakable faith in the essential goodness of man. He trusted even those with whom he disagreed. He believed that a seeker after truth must be willing to see the other person's point of view even if he be an adversary. This kind of fairness and honesty was innate in him. He talked on an equal basis to very simple people. He looked after the sick people with devotion and wrote often to many who needed his counsel. He loved music and his prayers, which were always inter-religious, were set to excellent music. He prayed regularly, generally in a congregation.

Gandhi's life attracted a large number of people. His personality was a living witness to the spirit of religion and individual excellence. These qualities endeared him to the people of India and also of other parts of the world drawn from different walks of life. His earlier associates joined him because of their attachment to a religious and meditative life. Later, he was joined by economists, artists, musicians, intellectuals, social workers, and a very large number of women from different sections of the society. Among his associates and disciples were people with very diverse temperaments and included Nehru, the intellectual and leader of the masses, Sardar Patel, the statesman,

Sarojini Naidu and Tagore, the poets, Rajagopalachari, the pragmatic thinker, Kumarappa, the economist, Andrews, the devout Christian, Rajendra Prasad, the selfless worker, and many others.

Mahatma Gandhi was a prolific writer. He founded or wrote continuously for several journals. These included the *Indian Opinion* in South Africa and *Young India*, *Navjivan*, *Harijan*, *Harijanbandhu*, and *Harijan Sevak* in India. He answered every letter he received and thus wrote thousands of letters in his own hand, usually on scraps of paper he saved from the letters received by him. Often, when he received a significant letter, even from an unknown person, he printed it in his journal and discussed it in public.

He wrote in three languages with equal facility—English, Hindi and Gujarati. His style of writing was simple and direct, wholly free from pomp and verbosity. His writings can be easily understood and enjoyed by even those who have not received high education.

Many followers of Gandhi have compiled the relevant portions from his writings and speeches on particular subjects. Such books are entitled: *To the Students*, *To the Women*, *On Khadi*, *On Prohibition*, etc. A very important compilation is called *The India of My Dreams*.

There are a great many books containing the letters he wrote to various people. All he ever wrote or said is now available in a 100-volume compilation titled *The Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

Which of his writings are the most important? This question would be answered differently by different people. His *Autobiography* is very important but it ends with the year 1922. The first book he wrote was the *Hind Swaraj* in 1908 and must be studied by anyone who wants to understand his approach to India's reconstruction. His *History of Satyagraha in South Africa* is a book of great importance. A very small booklet called—*The Constructive Programme* is also an important contribution. It deals with all aspects of the life of India's masses and suggests specific

methods for all-round betterment. The booklet discusses *khadi*, basic education, environmental sanitation, education of women, improvement of cattle, control of leprosy, Harijan uplift, communal unity and many other issues. This booklet was to many a blueprint of India's national regeneration. In fact, it is this booklet which contains the hint that small groups of people must unite to make their own lives more satisfying in material conditions and spiritual fulfilment.

As a leader of the movement launched for India's independence, Gandhi achieved everything through the involvement of the people. He had a deep-rooted suspicion of the apparatus of the government and thus advocated the idea of '*Gram Swaraj*' in which people would take the initiative to solve their own problems. The secret of his success lay in the fact that he was able to mobilise people for sustained action on a voluntary basis. His life is a shining example of the philosophy of selflessness and self-help by the people who have a mission in life. In the chapters which follow, three examples of organised movements through voluntary action have been discussed to provide motivation to others, who wish to follow the path shown by Gandhi during his exemplary life as a selfless Indian and a compassionate human being devoted to the cause of the poor, the neglected and the oppressed.

II

Chipko— the Struggle in the Himalayas

"Now the leader desired to sit where I was seated, as he wanted to smoke and possibly to have some fresh air. So he took a piece of dirty sack-cloth, spread it on the footboard and, addressing me said, 'You sit on this'. The insult was more than I could bear. In fear and trembling, I said to him, 'You would have me sit at your feet. I will not do so...' As I was struggling through these sentences, the man came down upon me and began heavily to box my ears. He seized me by the arm and tried to drag me down. I clung to the brass rails of the coach-box and was determined to keep my hold even at the risk of breaking my wristbones."

—Mahatma Gandhi in his book *An Autobiography*

'Chipko' is a Hindi word which means "to hug hard" or "to cling". The Chipko movement got its name from the fact that when some men came to cut the trees with axes, the village women of some sub-Himalayan districts in north India clung to the trees and told them, "We will not let you cut the trees; first cut us down, then you can cut the trees." These women were ready to risk injury and probably death rather than see the trees in their villages cut down. The Chipko movement grew out of such daring and resolute action of illiterate, poor, rural women who are generally considered ignorant, weak and, therefore, incapable of playing any role in public affairs.

The Himalayas extend five thousand kilometres to the east from the upper reaches of Kashmir. The name 'Himalaya' is a Sanskrit term meaning "the place of eternal snow". Even a schoolchild in the remotest corner of India has heard of the Himalayas. These mountains are magnificent and have been celebrated in song and dance, and in stories and folklore of India. Besides being the source of the highest rivers of India, these are also the paradise for those who seek adventure and the simple joys of Nature. Millions of Hindus consider these rivers sacred. The Himalayas contain magnificent snow-clad peaks, some of them the highest in the world. Himalayas have abundant forests, especially in the lower and middle reaches, although the variety of the trees is less compared to that of the Western Ghats.

The men and women of these hills are simple and cheerful, physically tough and hard working. These men and women have lived for centuries in undisturbed harmony with Nature. The Himalayas are also the home of varied mountain cultures. There has been little or no "progress" or "development" in these regions for many decades.

Sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century, the railways came to India. To build the railway tracks wooden sleepers were required in very large numbers. One Mr Wilson, an Englishman, was the first person who started the felling of trees in the Bhagirathi valley and then floated the logs down the river to Hardwar. These wooden sleepers are flat pieces of solid wood about seven feet long, one foot broad and four inches thick. For laying down of railway tracks and building coaches, the railway authorities had to turn to the Himalayan forests to obtain wood. Where the logs could not be transported down the rivers, new roads were laid to transport the felled trees. Thus began the exploitation of the forest wealth of the Himalayas and a serious disturbance of the mountain ecology.

Once begun, the exploitation became more intense and progressed from the sub-mountainous region to the higher

reaches. The roads went deeper and were wider. Such easy access to the forest wood itself increased the demand for it. Timber was required for furniture in the plains and some excellent wood could even be exported. The axe-men reached first the lower Himalayas and then progressed further north.

Even in the nineteenth century, the government knew that the mountain people and the tribals who lived in the forests had traditional and customary rights over these forests and what they produced. The forests gave them fruit, fodder, fertiliser, fibre, and fuel. The forests ensured sufficient rains and productive hill agriculture. The rivers and springs of the Himalayas never dried. The trees protected the soil and purified the air.

The then British Government, however, decided that the forest must be made a source of revenue to the State. This led to commercial exploitation of the forests. Contractors were given permits to fell certain trees. The contractors just cut the trees; they did not replant any trees—thus rendering the soil barren and scarred.

Things however were not confined to “permits” and “felling”. Many contractors took permits to fell about five acres and then illegally damaged and took away wood from twice that acreage, aware as they were that there was a lot of money in the timber and wood trade.

The people in the towns and big cities of the plains needed wood for many purposes. The growing population of India led to increased demand for wood. Tree-cutting went on ruthlessly, sometimes legally, often illegally. This was happening to forests all over India. Even today the situation in the country is no less alarming.

Most of the income from this lucrative trade went to the rich and powerful contractors. The hill people got nothing out of it except the paltry wages which the contractors paid them to fell the trees. The magnificent oaks, pines and many kinds of conifers came under the ruthless axe of the traders and contractors in wood.

The people in the mountains have been aware for almost a century about their own customary rights on these forests and their produce. Once the British Government decided to "use" the forests for revenue and for railway construction, the rights of the people were directly encroached upon. Often the forest-dwellers were prevented by law from using or taking any forest produce, while outside contractors could literally rob the forest wealth.

Sooner or later this was bound to have repercussions. As early as 1905, people in the Garhwal Kumaon region agitated against government control of the forests. It was however in 1930 that people from the Tehri Garhwal district launched a massive campaign of peaceful resistance—a *satyagraha* against the removal of trees. The agitation by the hill people in those days was bound up in many ways to the freedom movement in the rest of the country. It was at this time that a remarkable leader in the hills, Gobind Ballabh Pant, led the people's agitation for their forest rights. He later emerged as a freedom fighter and a respected statesman who played a crucial role in the movement for India's independence. Resistance movements through non-violent means appealed to the masses and this holds true to this day, when one finds that the Chipko movement of the hill people draws its main strength from organised action through non-violent defence of the rights of the people over their own surroundings. No doubt the Chipko movement has assumed a significance far beyond its immediate objective: it signifies the broader issue of preserving the nation's threatened environment besides giving the local people the right to prevent exploitation of their natural resources.

It is true that the then British Government and the successive Indian Governments tried to evolve a scientific forestry policy. Some forest working plans were made which emphasised the need for compensatory planting of trees, that is, for every tree removed, a sapling would be planted. However, as has often been the case, such scientific

principles remained and continue to remain on paper only. Trees continue to be ruthlessly chopped for profit and revenue. A forest contains trees of many kinds and Nature has its own way of maintaining a delicate balance among the various species. Often the replanting, if done, was done in such an unplanned manner that only the commercially useful species were planted. This practice is called "monoculture" and it generates only one species. It destroys biological diversity so vital to forest ecology and leads to severe degradation of the forest.

The Chipko movement, as an organised people-based voluntary effort to save the forests, started in the seventies in some hill districts of Uttar Pradesh. The hill districts of Uttar Pradesh combined together are referred to as 'Uttarakhand' meaning "the northern region". It contains two separate areas called Garhwal and Kumaon. The men here are tough and hardy. Many of them seek employment in the armed forces and army regiments drawn from these regions display conspicuous valour in battle. Every young boy here looks forward to wearing a uniform and proudly showing it off. No longer do they like to work on back-breaking tasks of agriculture. This perhaps is one of the reasons why women in the hills bear more than their fair share of the burdensome routine of raising crops, caring for children, collecting fuel and fetching water from far-off sources. And, despite it all, the status of women here is no better than that of their counterparts elsewhere.

When forests were flourishing and trees were aplenty, women could collect the fodder for cattle and the fuel for cooking and heating near the village. The cutting of trees and the consequent disappearance of forests has resulted in fuel becoming scarce and the grass and shrub used as fodder becoming unavailable. All this meant that the hill women would have to walk longer distances and work longer hours to get even small quantities of fuel and fodder. Collecting a headload of firewood was becoming a fatiguing and a frightening job.

It is a known fact that when trees go, the overflowing forest springs dry up and agriculture deteriorates. Subsequently the lives of the women become one of unending drudgery and the life of the general population becomes impoverished. Most of us vaguely know the terrible effects of removing the tree cover on the hills and on the plains, though many do not know exactly how it happens. The trees with their roots bind the soil together. Grasses and shrubs do the same. These roots penetrate the soil and make the soil capable of absorbing the water. Such earth easily absorbs much of the rains when they come. In fact, the trees themselves encourage the clouds to discharge their moisture. Without the trees the monsoons often fail and the warm clouds just pass by. This creates drought and results in failure of a good crop. Thus there is no food, no water. With the removal of trees, the earth gets subjected to the direct hot rays of the sun. The soil gets hard, becomes dry and incapable of retaining any water. All the rain water which falls on the hill slopes strikes the earth with great force without the tree leaves being there to soften the impact of the droplets. The rain water simply runs down without getting absorbed. Since there is nothing on the earth to obstruct its flow, it washes off the fertile top soil and the rocks show up. In this way, tons of soil is washed far down into the rivers which get steadily silted up. The silt reduces the capacity of the rivers to hold water and the heavy rains lead to silted rivers breaking their banks every year and creating the havoc of a flood. In short, the destruction of the Himalayan forests is the chief cause of recurring droughts, devastating floods and reduced crop yields in the hills and in the plains. Such effects are felt especially in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam and also in the neighbouring country, Bangladesh.

A scientific survey has measured the flow of water in the Ganga at Hardwar where it leaves the mountains and descends into the plains. The maximum flow of water in the peak season is fifty times greater than the minimum

flow in the lean season. This shows that during the rainy season and again when the snow melts, too much water flows down too fast, leaving only a trickle of water when the season is over. It is clearly a dangerous sign. There is not a single year in which the plains are spared from either a flood or a drought. All this causes immense hardship to the people. Crops get ruined, villages are washed away and the cattle die.

Deforestation also leads to landslides which destroy whole villages and ruin the farms over large areas. When the land gets stripped of all trees and vegetative cover, the top soil which is fertile and barely six inches deep gets easily washed away because there is nothing to hold it. The rocks get exposed and the land is rendered infertile. Soon the rocks and mud become unstable resulting in landslides during the monsoon. Such landslides often block roads and sometimes obstruct the flow of rivers, leading to flooding of an entire village. The tragedy of land losing its fertility is a slow and creeping process which gradually acquires dangerous proportions. By the time the damage becomes apparent, it is too late to reverse it.

Ruthless deforestation in the Himalayas has been going on for nearly a century. Its disastrous impact can be seen in many places. In Srinagar the famous Dal Lake is heavily silted. In Himachal Pradesh the once beautiful Khajiyar Lake is now dirty. In Le Corbusier's beautifully planned city of Chandigarh, water supply has become scarce because the trees in the upper reaches are gone. Many districts in the plains have suffered extreme damage to agriculture. Assam and the north-eastern States have often been experiencing heavy floods. Felling of trees for firewood continues unabated almost all over India.

The exploitation of the Himalayas did not stop with the felling of trees for wood and timber. What was worse, deep cuts were made on the barks of *chir* trees to tap resin, a process similar to rubber tapping. It did not stop at that. Extensive mining was done of the hillsides for extracting

lime. The wounding of the trees for resin weakened the trees and often they succumbed before a strong breeze. The mining for lime ruined the soil's water retention ability. Lime made the soil porous leading to absorption of rain water. The mining of lime left ugly scars on the hillsides and dried up the perennial springs. Take the case of the beautiful hill station of Mussoorie in Dehradun district. It faces acute water shortage throughout the year primarily due to the activities of the lime-mining contractors. Some ecologists unsuccessfully campaigned for several years against the grant of lime-mining leases by the government. It was only the recent verdict of the Supreme Court and the realisation by the government departments of the adverse effects of lime mining that a halt was called to such harmful activity.

Trees were disappearing, water was drying; survival itself was being threatened. The women saw these dangers, aligned themselves with like-minded men and women, and launched a movement: a movement cutting across districts and uniting thousands of people in their commitment to work together for long stretches of time. Felling had to be stopped and replanting was to be done on the hillsides laid bare. The task involved a heroic struggle first, and thereafter, patient hard work. In short, a Gandhian endeavour.

Mirabehn, the English disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who established her *ashram* at Rishikesh in the foothills, was the first to realise that the devastating floods there were the results of deforestation and change in the forest cover in the Himalayas. She warned against the propagation of pines and elimination of oak forests as early as 1949. But it was Sarlabehn, another English disciple of Gandhi, who established an *ashram* in Kausani to train hill girls as social activists and constructive workers. Her *ashram* became the centre of Sarvodaya movement in the hills. She established a Brotherhood of Sarvodaya Activists. It was this organisation, which first took up the problem of liquor

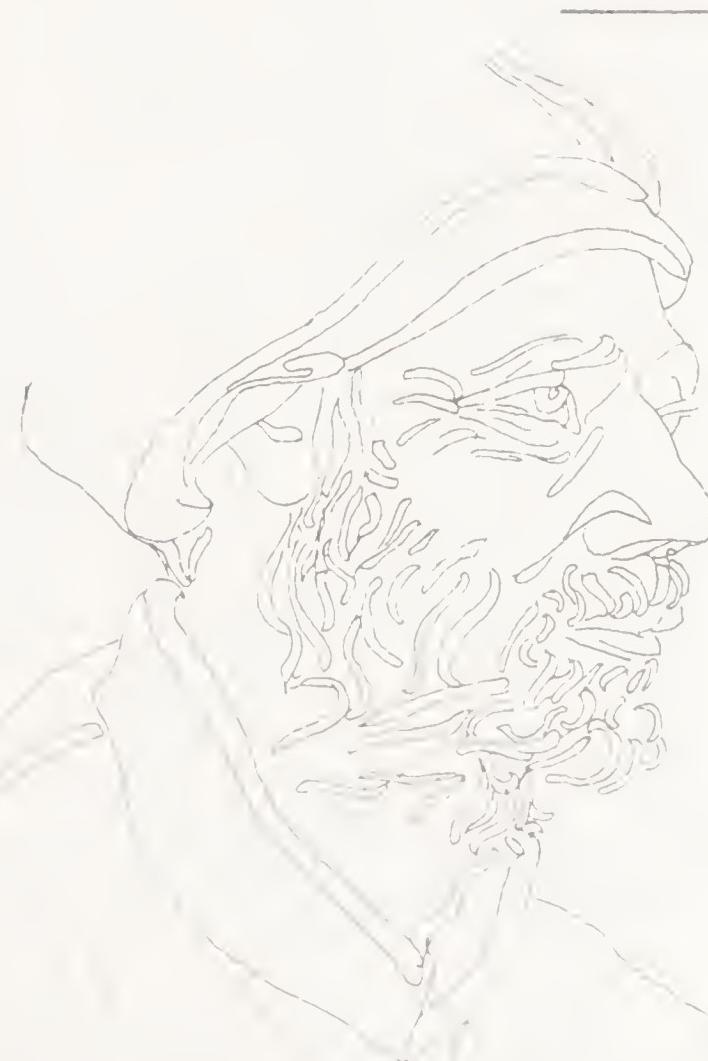
and got liquor shops closed in five hill districts by launching a mass movement in which women were in the forefront.

After the success of the prohibition movement in 1971, the Brotherhood took up the forest problem, for which inspiration came from a pledge taken by the villagers at Tilari on 30 May 1968 to re-establish the friendly relationship between human beings and the forests—the life and soul of the hill people.

Two prominent men in the forefront of this Chipko movement were Shri Chandiprasad Bhatt, who lives in Gopeshwar in Chamoli district, and Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna, who lives in Silyara village near Ghanasali in Tehri district. For several years since the late sixties these two and their men had been going round the hill villages creating awareness and mobilising public opinion. They were touring the whole of the Uttarakhand on foot. This area, as mentioned earlier, consists of two regions with total of eight districts: Pithoragarh, Nainital and Almora which are collectively called Kumaon; and Tehri, Pauri, Chamoli, Uttarkashi and Dehradun which together are referred to as Garhwal region.

Chandiprasad Bhatt, simple and unassuming, had earlier been a prominent worker in a voluntary institution called Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh. Dasholi is the name of the area, while the other words mean "village union for self-rule". Among many others, a few of his notable colleagues to assist him in his work include Anusuy Prasad, Chakradhar Tiwari and Murali Lal who joined the struggle right at the beginning. Ghanshyam Ratudi is a poet and folk-singer; he set to music the Chipko songs and sang them in village meetings. Botanist Virendra Kumar was always there to give sound scientific advice.

From the Tehri region comes the renowned environmentalist, Sunderlal Bahuguna. His close colleagues include his wife Smt Vimla, who was brought up in Gandhi Ashram, Dhoom Singh Negi, a dedicated Gandhian and agriculturist, and Shashi, a young woman teacher. Panduranga Hegde from far-off Karnataka worked w



(Top) The courageous Gaura Devi whose ingenious tactics saved trees from being felled.

(Bottom) Ghanshyam Ratudi, the composer of poems on Chipko movement



A tribal clings to a tree to protect it from the axe of timber merchants.

Bahuguna for years and is now back in his home State spreading the message.

In December 1972, the hill people demonstrated against exploitation of forests by the timber merchants. The first Chipko demonstration in Mandel village of Chamoli district took place in April 1973, when people declared that they would cling to trees if ash trees were felled by a sports goods company.

The story of 'Chipko' continued in a village called Renni near the holy place of pilgrimage—Badrinath in the same Chamoli district. In this village, where tree-felling was continuing unabated, men and women of the village were acutely disturbed at this trend but could find no solution to the problem. What hurt them more was that the organisation Dasholi Gram Swaraj Sangh—which was giving employment to some local people through small forest-based industries, was denied access to a small amount of the forest produce by the government while everything was being allotted to the contractors.

It was then in 1974, that events in this Renni village took a dramatic turn. A well-known sports goods company in Uttar Pradesh obtained permission to cut and remove about 2,500 trees in the forest surrounding the village. This company was aware of the possible protests and agitation by the villages and the likelihood of no local labourer coming forth to cut the trees. Hence outside labourers were brought in, and on the day appointed for the cutting of trees, in a clever move, all able-bodied men likely to offer resistance to tree-felling were sent out of the village on some pretext. Axe-men together with government forest-guards stealthily sneaked into the village in ones and twos, hoping not to be noticed. But, the women saw. They knew their own men were away. What were they to do now? Watch helplessly or act? The moment to take decision had come.

The women decided to act!

Gaura Devi, a young woman, ran from hut to hut,

shouting, inviting the women to come out. Soon women and young girls totalling 25 in number, came trooping out. There was a lone man in the village, Murari Lal, who was down with high fever. He too knew. He came out tottering. "Come all. Come!" said Gaura Devi. "Let us *chipko* to the trees." The women ran quickly up and down the small mountain paths. They quickly reached the spot when the men were just about to commence their work. "Each one of you hug one tree," commanded Gaura Devi. The plan to hug the trees had been discussed rather vaguely at the earlier meetings in many hill villages. Now, there was no time to discuss and debate.

Each woman clung to a tree. They faced the men squarely. The Chipko movement was born!

The men tried various methods to persuade the women to "leave in peace and go home". First, they argued, "Look, we have the permit. We only want to cut a small number. Then we will go." This did not work. They tried other methods. "We will give the wages to your men from tomorrow." This too failed. Despite the presence of armed forest-guards hovering in the background, the women were undeterred. "No!" was the women's firm reply. "You are just not going to cut these trees. First cut us down." By this time, some women who had gone for their daily work elsewhere in the forests learnt what was happening in their village. They too came rushing. The original crowd of barely twenty-five women now swelled to a hundred. There were sixty odd men against them. There was an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation!

The men became aggressive. They turned abusive. They started ridiculing and making crude remarks. They started threatening. They did everything short of physical violence to intimidate the women. "It is now or never," shouted Gaura Devi. "Do not be afraid of them." The women stood resolute, hugging the trees, hoping and praying that their own men would come back soon. But that was not to be.

However the axe-men were the first to relent. They

decided to go back. The first blow had been struck in defence of Nature.

This was followed by another notable incident in February 1978 in the Hemwal valley. The women had tied sacred thread round the trees marked for felling. They had to face armed police to save the trees. They even courted arrest. The slogan of the women was:

What do the forests bear?
Soil, water and pure air.
Soil, water and pure air,
Are the basis of life.

Throughout the early period of this movement the leaders, influenced by Gandhian thought, had persuaded the men and women not to indulge in violence, but face any threat or violence without flinching.

The 'Chipko' became a movement of the people, especially of the women. Months of mental training had prepared these simple people to offer non-violent resistance to what they considered unjust. It remained above politics, though several local politicians belonging to different parties supported it publicly because the movement had raised a fundamentally important issue.

The Chipko movement in its broader context is concerned with the conservation of the ecological balance in Nature. Such issues are not very simple and cannot be settled by mere laws and rules. What is needed is education of the masses and a clear perception by the people of the value of Nature. How can we drink water which we have polluted with chemicals? Will not the fish be destroyed in the water rendered lethal by pollutants? How can we keep on breathing air which is fouled by smoke and dust? If we remove the tree cover and the grasses, are we not creating deserts? Do we want our wildlife to survive or perish? Such questions must be asked and answers provided in simple language using simple methods. The Chipko activists bear this in mind. A great deal of their message

spreads through songs sung in public meetings. Students are often taught these songs which they sing in chorus on the right occasions. *Padayatras*, or marches on foot, are often undertaken by Chipko enthusiasts. One such *padayatra* covered a distance of five thousand kilometres from Kashmir in the north to Kohima in the east. These activists even went to Nepal. Unsure but undaunted by the hardships, they braved all and won the support of many people through friendly approach and sincerity of purpose.

Once the movement became strong, the Uttar Pradesh Government banned the felling of those trees more than a thousand metres above sea-level.

This partly met the demand of the activists. But they faced several obstacles. The forest contractors who made large profits from the timber trade were powerful and influential. They had a vested interest in continuing to remove the trees. They produced an argument: "In Bihar and West Bengal, there is plenty of underground coal. Can the people of these States claim that the underground coal belongs only to them and it should not be mined for use in other States?" The implication of this argument is that the Himalayas have plenty of trees of commercial value and that the whole country has the right to benefit from this natural resource. When this argument failed, they used inducements of various kinds, like offering jobs for young women. Quite often they tried to attract the men to help them in their illegal activity of tree-felling by offering them decent wages and free alcohol. It is not very easy to organise those who are very poor. Even when organised, their unity can sometimes be disrupted by tempting a few to break away. The contractors had other methods of creating disagreements among their adversaries. They resorted to defaming their leaders through false allegations that the leaders had personal ambitions in politics or hope of private gain by monopolising the forests for eventual exploitation by their own nominees. Very often the leaders were accused of not understanding the complexities of forestry. All such

propaganda and inducements completely failed and the hill people stood united. They not only put up a common front against the exploiters, but invited botanists and scientists to advise them on ways and means for regeneration of the forests.

It was refreshing to see that many hills earlier laid bare and dry are now covered by saplings of different varieties which the villagers protect with great zest. It is not enough just to preserve the trees: it is necessary to plant fresh ones.

In any voluntary movement of this kind, many a times obstacles of this kind induce faint-hearted men and women to despair and give up. But in this movement the people, clearly envisaging the threat to their survival, decided to join hands and act. The movement relied essentially upon the motivation and morale of small groups of people. Each group consisted of the men and women of a single village, and assumed independent responsibility for preserving the trees in its own village. Thus, though each group was independent, all the groups had built up a common but flexible network of joint action. As we have seen the women dominated this movement. They formed Mahila Mangal Dals (Women's Welfare Associations) for dealing with many other problems and needs. These women work together cutting across caste distinctions and economic status. Local schools and colleges have persuaded some youth to give their free time to help these women. These organisations protect the trees not just from contractors but also from some of the villagers who are likely to sell wood stealthily when desperately in need of money.

The Chipko movement is not just a movement for saving trees and planting new trees. It stands for a basic change in land use for a "permanent economy"—and planting of five "F"—food, fodder, fuel, fertiliser and fibre trees. Its slogan is: "Ecology is permanent economy", and in recognition of this the Chipko was given the Right Livelihood Award. Those of us who tour these areas will

learn many fascinating aspects of this movement. The message of the movement has now spread to several parts of India. Panduranga Hegde of Sirsi town in Karnataka has started an identical movement and named it 'Appikko', meaning the same as 'Chipko'. In 1987 he marched from the southern tip of India at Kanyakumari upto the west coast till Goa. A great many men and women, young and old, joined this march. Baba Amte, the renowned activist of Maharashtra, is strongly committed to the preservation of tribal forests. In泰
"Save the Eastern Ghats Conservation Course" well-known thru

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exploitation, the remaining fish ever.
will slowly perish without reviving and
numbers. Diversity and variety of species found in nature
in wild places are necessary for the health of plant life in
general.

When we remove the forest cover containing different





(Top) Animals enjoying their natural habitat.
(Bottom) Flora and fauna native all.

kinds of trees and replant the area with just one kind which has commercial use, we are doing incalculable harm to Nature and to the whole geographical area. Depletion of genetic variety is dangerous. Forests not only serve as Nature-made dams and water reservoirs to protect us against flood and droughts but also supply this kind of genetic variety.

The Chipko movement though started initially as a fight against commercial exploitation of the forests has had some "spin-off" benefits: the self-image of the village women has gone up, they are more aware of their rights, they demand better lives for their families, they want better schools, more health care, better paid work and less drudgery.

Yet another significant result is that the movement which was purely local has now become a symbol of strong international movement committed to the preservation of Nature, combating pollution, preserving wildlife and to do everything to see that the precious Earth on which we live is not plundered for profit and destroyed by human folly. The Chipko movement has given new strength to the concept of "sustainable economic activities". Sustainability means that we should not exhaust the natural resources completely. Agriculture must not exhaust ^{the} fertility of the soil; industry must not exhaust ^{non-}renewable natural resources and so on.

Besides educating the young and adults on the importance of conservation of Nature through institutions and mass media, the moot point to be driven home is that in the name of economic development, let us not disturb the natural environment and ecology by allowing pollution of air through modern transportation, chemical effluents and wrong forestry practices for helping some industries. The price for economic development and progress cannot be paid by destroying Nature. Two leading conservationists, Shri Bandopadhyaya and Shrimati Vandana Shiva have this to say:

"The Chipko movement has been successful in forcing a fifteen-year ban on commercial green felling in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, in stopping clear felling in the Western Ghats and the Vindhya, and in generating pressure for a national forest policy which is more sensitive to the people's needs and to the ecological development of the country. Unfortunately, the Chipko movement has often been naively presented by vested interests as a reflection of a conflict between 'development' and 'ecological concern', implying that 'development' relates to material and objective bases of life while 'ecology' is concerned with non-material and subjective factors, such as scenic beauty. The deliberate introduction of this false and dangerous dichotomy between 'development' and 'ecology' disguises the real dichotomy between ecologically sound development and unsustainable and ecologically destructive economic growth. The latter is always achieved through the exploitation of life-support systems and the material deprivation of marginal communities. Genuine development can only be based on ecological stability which ensures sustainable supplies of vital resources. Gandhi and, later, his disciples Mirabehn and Sarlabehn clearly described how and why development is not necessarily contradictory to ecological stability. By questioning the destructive process of growth, ecological movements like Chipko have earned a reputation for obstructing the process of development."

Finally they conclude: "In fact, by constantly keeping ecological stability in focus, they provide the best guarantee for ensuring a stable material basis for life for all."

This should compel us to think!

III

Anandwan and Baba Amte

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test:

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny. In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

— Mahatma Gandhi

This is the saga of a man whose full name is Muralidhar Devidas Amte. It is a saga of courage, of commitment and of compassion. It is the story of a man who is a poet, a leader, a visionary, a friend of the poor. It is also the story of a man who is impatient and irrepressible.

Muralidhar was born on the 26 December 1914, in a small town in the western State of Maharashtra. His father's name was Devidas and the family name was Amte. Father Devidas was a big landlord and a government official with a high status in society. It was during his trips with his father that Muralidhar came to know of the horrifying conditions in which the landless spent their lives in bondage and in total ignorance. In a status-conscious and caste-conscious society, Muralidhar was a non-conformist, the odd boy. He disliked injustices and distinctions between

the high and the low. Once he was punished for sharing a meal with a lowly servant.

Early in life Muralidhar developed a love for Nature. The open skies, the mountains, the forests, the rivers and the wildlife—enchanted him. At times he would roam alone in the wild or travel in a bullock-cart to get a better view of Nature. It was at this time that he first came in contact with a group of tribals called Madiyagonds from Bastar district in central India. He loved these simple people, their self-reliant nature, and their truthfulness. He admired their unerring marksmanship in the forests where they hunted.

Young Muralidhar kept himself physically fit. He loved wrestling and swimming, horse-riding and shooting. Besides, he even learnt music and developed a love for poetry. Even now he writes some excellent poems in Marathi. Above all, he loved the performing arts—the play and the music. He was so impressed by the famous Hollywood star Norma Shearer and her acting that he wrote to her on an impulse and even now they write to each other. She has strongly supported his humanitarian work.

India was a colony of the British when Muralidhar was young and he, like many young men, was affected by the rising tide of the freedom movement. He considered it his patriotic duty to supply weapons to the men who believed in using violence to oust the British. In 1935, a severe earthquake occurred in Quetta, Baluchistan (now in Pakistan) leading to loss of life and property. Muralidhar joined an organised group which went to Quetta to offer relief services. When Gandhi launched his Quit India Movement in 1942, Muralidhar too was sent to jail for participating in the movement.

Once he saw some men trying to insult a woman. He was so incensed that he landed himself in a physical combat to save the woman. To this day he bears the scars of that encounter!

Muralidhar studied law and then settled down to practise law in the small town of Warora in Chandrapur

district of Maharashtra. But, his heart and his mind were constantly with the poor. His thoughts were: Here I earn a lot of money for speaking a few words in the court, while outside, a landless labourer toils for twelve hours and barely gets one rupee for his meals. Is this justice? What is my duty?

In 1946, Muralidhar went to Nagpur and met a young girl who was later to become his wife. She was given the name Sadhana, which means 'the spiritual quest'. The marriage proved to be an outstanding success. She became a friend and inspiration for this extraordinary man. After marriage Muralidhar confessed to his young wife, "I do not feel happy to take legal fees from my poor clients. This is virtually like exploiting them." Sadhana agreed. He gave up his legal practice and gave up all his rights over his father's property.

Muralidhar tried to serve the people of his town through the local municipality. In 1948, he was elected vice-chairman of the Warora Municipal Council. He became the leader of the scavengers, locally called *Bhangis*. The *Bhangis*, were the most under-privileged class in the Hindu society, condemned to a life of menial and degrading kind of work—handling dirt and human waste. These unfortunate men and women, regarded as 'untouchables' by conservative Hindus, lived in abject poverty accepting 'untouchability' as a part of their religious tradition. Gandhi had already given a call to combat "this crime against man and God." These people were poor outcasts, and had to build their wretched huts far away from the main village. Shunned by everyone, they had no rights, owned no land, went to no school. Gandhi pleaded with his followers not to regard the job of the *Bhangis* as undignified. He, in fact, exhorted his followers to clean their own toilets, by himself setting an example.

The campaign of Gandhi to free these men and women from their degrading occupation was called the 'Bhangi Mukti', or the "liberation of the Bhangi".

Muralidhar took up this challenge and started cleaning forty latrines a day. One day, during a heavy downpour, he was carrying on his head a bucketful of dirt. Suddenly, he saw a man groaning with pain in a nearby water-logged ditch. The man's face was swollen and heavily disfigured. The wounds on his body were infested with worms. This was the first time in his life that Muralidhar saw a leprosy patient.

Muralidhar was never the same again. He was shocked and confused. He covered the miserable man with a rough cloth, and soon departed for home, thoroughly shocked at the sight. He came home, had a bath to wash himself of the dirt, but could not remove the sight of that wretched man from his mind. One thought kept disturbing his mind, "Suppose I or my wife or my son were to get this dreadful disease, where will we go?" He consoled himself by saying, "Where there is fear, there cannot be any love and where there is no love, there is no God. I must banish this fear from my mind."

Here it is imperative to know something about leprosy and the fear it generates.

Leprosy in India is known as '*Kushtarog*'. The dreaded disease has been mentioned in our ancient Vedic literature. Description of the disease and its treatment has been given in *Sushruta Samhita*, a medical treatise written around 400 B.C. Leprosy is a chronic disease which affects the skin and the peripheral nerves. If untreated, it may lead to deformities of hands, face and eyes.

The cause of leprosy is a bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It was isolated in 1873 by the Norwegian medical researcher, Hansen. Thus leprosy is also referred to as Hansen's Disease.

Before the bacteria responsible for the disease could be isolated, it was presumed that the disease was due to heredity, climatic factors, unclean personal habits, curse of God, etc. In India, where every good or evil is attributed to *karma*, it was thought that the patient had acquired the

disease as a result of his past actions. The disease was considered a curse with no cure; thus the patients were segregated, ostracised and socially rejected.

Leprosy can be of two different types; the first type is called *Lepromatous* or multi-bacillary. It affects the whole body and is infectious. Out of the total of four million leprosy patients in India, about twenty per cent suffer from this type of disease. If untreated, plaques and nodules develop and severe mutilations of the face follow. The second type is called *Non-lepromatous* or pauci-bacillary and is more localised. It is non-infectious and most patients in India have this type. Its early sign is the formation of a single patch or a few patches. Some local loss of sensation also occurs in this case.

Leprosy is a dreaded disease, with the patients being called 'lepers'. In the West, leprosy has been eliminated through education, high standard of life, and excellent sanitation, but in Asia, Africa and South America leprosy is widely prevalent. In India, the majority of patients are found in southern and eastern India.

Until the late 1930s, there was no specific drug for leprosy. Such treatment as was there was intended to relieve some symptoms, keep the patients clean and comfortable and enable them to make their life a little less miserable.

Leprosy untreated very often disables and disfigures the patient. Since the skin of the palms and the soles of the feet become insensitive, the patient keeps on hurting himself or scalding himself leading to wounds and blisters.

The severe facial and other disfigurements normally frighten people and they feel strong revulsion bordering on horror when they come across a patient with advanced leprosy. Parents, wives, husband and children, all instinctively avoid a person with leprosy. Physical disability and social unacceptance render him incapable of working and earning. Such a patient, whether a man or a woman, becomes a burden on the family and this is generally the cause why the patient has to leave the family. The patient,

on facing rejection, is often compelled to take to begging as the only means of survival. Such beggars lose all self-respect and develop the degrading habit of displaying the deformities to arouse pity.

Years ago the patient's initial reaction on discovering the disease on his body was to hide the fact, but over the years, this attitude has changed since it has become known that now leprosy is curable through modern treatment. However, many patients still wish to avoid detection. Families with a patient at home tend to keep him or her virtually confined to the inner recesses of the house. It needs to be pointed out that hiding the disease is harmful because if it is kept hidden and left untreated, leprosy progresses relentlessly.

The medical breakthrough in the treatment of leprosy came in the late thirties with the development of a medicine called DDS or Dapsone. Its first trials in India were made by a dedicated British medical missionary, Dr Cochrane, in the South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu. The results he achieved were very encouraging and till today Dapsone is preferred in the treatment of leprosy. It is a cheap drug. Had it been expensive, the government and voluntary institutions could not have supported big programmes for the treatment of leprosy. In recent years two new drugs, Rifampycine and Clofazimine, have become available. These two, in combination with Dapsone, are currently being used in some parts of India with the hope that if found successful, massive programmes based on these three drugs might be taken up to wipe out leprosy in India by the year 2000 A.D. This treatment is called the Multi-Drug Therapy and has raised high hopes among public health personnel and social workers.

Now, there are definite indications that leprosy can be controlled through effective drugs, better understanding of the disease and increasing the number of leprosy clinics.

Physical deformities are becoming less owing to early treatment. In the fifties, Dr Paul Brand of the Christian

Medical College and Hospital, Vellore pioneered rehabilitative surgery to enable patients with clawed fingers to use their hands. For earning a livelihood, hands are needed and such surgery which makes hands normal, thus makes the patient self-reliant. This surgery was a landmark in leprosy cure.

All said and done, new cases of leprosy still keep on coming for treatment. But what is encouraging is that early treatment definitely cures and leaves no deformities whatever. Treatment, once begun, must continue for the rest of the patient's life. Scientific research is continuing in a bid to develop a preventive vaccine.

Though leprosy can be cured, the society's rejection of the patient continues. Muralidhar's resolve was to challenge this problem.

At Dattapur near Warora, is a colony-cum-hospital for leprosy patients which came up largely due to the inspired teachings of Gandhi who had made treatment and care of leprosy patients part of his 'constructive programme'. Muralidhar started living in this colony to learn of the problems associated with leprosy and look for solution. He built a little hut, housed some leprosy patients there, and finally, in 1948, started a centre for diagnosis and treatment of leprosy in his home town, Warora.

By then, he had come to realise that he would have to study to understand how to fight leprosy. He enrolled himself at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Calcutta and underwent a one-year course in paramedical work relating to leprosy. He learnt that the vaccine for leprosy was not ready yet as it was not possible to transmit leprosy artificially to an animal. He offered himself as a guinea pig and got himself injected by a culture of *leprosy bacilli*. This required rare courage. But nothing happened to Muralidhar.

In 1950, he founded the Maharogi Sewa Samiti for the care of leprosy patients. He soon saw that what was required was a place for the patients where they could live

and get treated, be productive and independent, and get rehabilitated. Economic independence is the basis of full rehabilitation. Muralidhar aimed at that.

He asked for and obtained a piece of land in the Chandrapur forest from the local State government. The forest area near Warora town was full of wild animals and scorpions. With his young wife Sadhana, his two little sons—Vikas and Prakash, six leprosy patients and just fourteen rupees in his pocket,¹ Muralidhar came here to settle down. He put up bamboo huts, dug a well and started living here.

This was the beginning of Anandwan, the 'forest of joy'.

Muralidhar now came to be called affectionately as Baba Amte or simply Baba. With his fundamental belief that life must be full of joy and hope, Baba Amte set about bringing joy and hope in the lives of leprosy patients. He strove towards treatment and rehabilitation of the affected.

Hard work, careful planning and firm resolve became the order of the day at Anandwan. Everyone joined in the work; no one was high, no one was low. Together they felled trees, removed rocks, plotted fields, laid out roads, planned gardens and built their cottages. It was a joint endeavour. "I want to give them a chance, not charity," Baba said frequently. One small clinic became a hospital, with the passing of years. Today the hospital takes fifteen hundred in-patients and daily treatment is given to five hundred out-patients. Each patient is treated with care and compassion. Besides having arrangement for conducting scientific research on leprosy, the hospital offers community health services to the surrounding villages.

The rehabilitation programme at Anandwan aims at allowing a patient to go back to what he was doing. This is important. In most cases people like to feel that they are perfectly all right and can lead a normal life. With this purpose, the emphasis was mainly on agriculture though training in various trades and skills was also imparted.



Baba on lepers: "My patients impart with their hands, cracked by leprosy, all the rainbow colours on their vegetable plants."



Rehabilitated leper women living in dignity.

The patients were re-trained in the skills they already possessed. These included mat-weaving, handloom and leather work, wood work, smithy, decorative arts, cattle rearing, book binding, tailoring, sheet metal work, paramedical skills, etc. Anandwan started overflowing with patients in need.

In 1967, Baba decided to open yet another centre at Somnath, a hundred kilometres away. Here too, patients cleared forest, built small neat houses and started living in dignity. A striking achievement at Somnath was the economical use of available surface water for agriculture. The whole area was surveyed and small check-dams were built to hold and impound rain water. Soon the dry region of Somnath became a model. Crops were bountiful. "My patients impart with their hands, cracked by leprosy, all the rainbow colours on their vegetable plots," Baba once proudly declared.

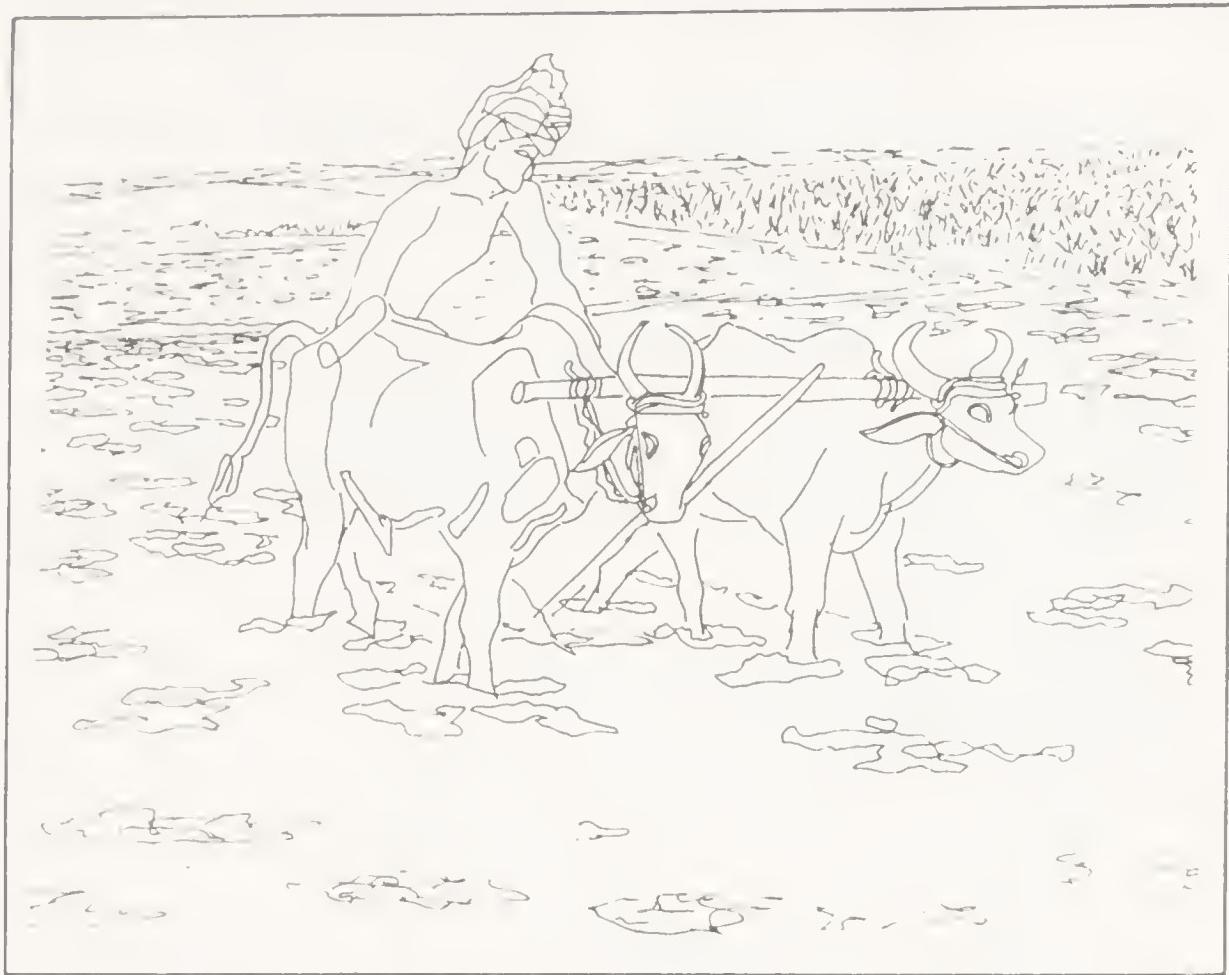
He encouraged the patients to build a school and two colleges for Anandwan. These were not just for the residents of the colony but also for people coming from other parts of the country. Later came many other buildings. Soon the outcasts became donors to a healthy society.

The latest project to come up is at Hemalkasa near Bhamragarh. It seeks to fulfil the childhood dream of Baba Amte. He had known the Madiyagond tribals from his boyhood days. These tribals—simple, free from guile and friendly—were exploited by outsiders and traders and forest officials. They were men and women of honesty and honour though living in the Stone Age. They lived entirely on hunting and food gathering. Scantly dressed, living in primitive huts in the open, exposed to dangers from wild beasts and fire, they were often plagued by severe illnesses and chronic hunger. The area is located in Gadchiroli district flanked by three rivers, and is at the trijunction of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. The forests are dark, lovely and deep. Baba's elder son Dr Vikas and his doctor-wife Bharati were already looking after the

vast medical and rehabilitative set-up at Anandwan. The other son, Dr Prakash and his doctor-wife Mandakini took up the challenge to go and work in Hemalkasa. Dr Prakash gave up his post-graduate study in surgery to start a small make-shift clinic under primitive conditions. Then came up a simple hospital and medical outposts deeper inside the jungle. All supplies of food and medicine were brought in twice a year. The tribals came for treatment. Their illnesses were many. Burns were very common because on cold nights they lit fires to keep warm, slept nearby and often rolled into the fire. Injuries caused by wild animals were quite common, especially by bears who can inflict serious ugly wounds. Chronic hunger led to malnutrition and all the associated diseases common among the tribals.

This Hemalkasa project is named as 'Lok Biradari' by Baba, meaning "People's Brotherhood". The medical work was only the forerunner of the project. The basic aim, however, was larger and wider. It was the vision of Baba to ensure the very survival of these simple and lovable people as they were under the threat of being wiped out by the incoming civilisation.

Baba wanted to protect these exploited tribals by making them aware of their situation. If they are to defend themselves, they must be self-reliant. For this, they must learn farming and their children must go to school. Baba has done both these. To improve farming, high quality seeds are distributed. The tribals also maintain a dairy, rear goats and pigs and keep poultry. More important, Baba and his people have told the tribals of their rights and strengthened them to resist exploitation. The communication between Baba's group and the tribals is a continuous process of free interaction between the two. There are six sub-centres attached to the base hospital and these cover the remotest parts of the tribal forest. The sub-centres ensure that in this hilly forest terrain, medical service and other work continues even in the monsoon when heavy rains and flooded rivers cut off one area from



Rehabilitated lepers engaged in constructive activities.



(Top) Tribals planting trees to counter deforestation.

(Bottom) A Madiyagond tribal learning to plant a tree from Baba Amte's volunteer.

another. Yet another activity of the Hemalkasa Lok Biradari Project is to train village-level workers for integrated rural development. These workers are trained in health education, agriculture and in organising the tribals to fight corruption, injustice and exploitation.

Hemalkasa is a story of triumph. It is a saga of the successful survival and renewed dignity of fifty thousand Madiyagonds whom Baba called "the loneliest, the lost and the last."

In recent years Baba Amte has been greatly pained by the violence and terrorism that have gripped several parts of the country. Such horrible actions are perpetrated by people who often have reactionary goals or sectarian objectives. Often these atrocities are committed by the young who are misguided or governed by bravado. The terror that is created hurts especially the old, women and children who are innocent and incapable of self-defence. Baba regards all violence as mindless, and is greatly alarmed by the threat posed by such violence to India's unity and integrity. India's unity is of prime concern to him and to maintain which he would give all he has. With an unshakeable faith in the country's youth, in December 1985 he asked the young people to join him in a march from the southern tip of India at Kanyakumari to the northernmost State of Kashmir. Despite his own physical disability which has compelled him for the past many years to take to the bed, he led the march lying in a van. He called this the 'Knit India March'. Baba explained: "We asked an alien government to quit India. Now some forces are trying to split India. I am asking you to knit India." Throughout the march he appealed to the people against a brother killing brother; one community attacking another; one linguistic group harbouring hatred against another. He called upon young men and women to abjure terrorism and violence. "Responsibility is not transferable," he proclaimed with passion. The march wound its way through many States to reach Kashmir a few months later.

Wherever the marchers went, the local people responded with enthusiasm.

The most significant part of the march was Baba's visit and his subsequent long stay in the State of Punjab, where the wounds and scars of terror and violence were fresh and disheartening. He met hundreds of people from all religions to share in their suffering. He talked to the terrorists. He lived in the villages of Punjab for a long time to instil confidence and hope among the people.

Baba organised yet another march at the end of 1988 from Itanagar in the east to Dwarka in the west. That was a five-thousand kilometre march. Again the young joined him in large numbers. He repeated his message of India's oneness and unity.

What sort of a man is Baba Amte? Who inspired him? The poet Rabindranath Tagore had a very strong influence on Baba Amte. Baba himself is a poet and his poems in Marathi have strong aesthetic appeal. Another person to influence him was Mahatma Gandhi whose commitment to the poor, whose loyalty to India's unity, and whose love for truth have left a great impression on Baba's mind. Vinoba Bhave, a true disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, who lived very near Wardha also made a mark on him. A perceptive scholar and an intellectually gifted man, Vinoba came from the tradition of the saints of Maharashtra.

A very powerful influence on Baba was that of a school-teacher, Sane Guruji, who was not very well-known outside Maharashtra. This ordinary school-teacher was a man of great sensitivity and stood for human equality. The unity of the country was dear to him and he founded a movement called 'Anter-Bharti', meaning "Integrated India". He wrote several books in Marathi and one of them, *The Mother of Shyam*, is a masterpiece. Brought up in poverty, Sane Guruji was greatly appalled by the misery he saw around him because of the violence that man inflicted on man and also by the pettiness, discrimination, and disparities between the high and the low.

An extremely sensitive man himself, Baba Amte has

been influenced by the personality of Jesus Christ. One Marathi poem of his refers to Christ's crucifixion. It was Christ's compassion for mankind which is deeply rooted in Baba's life and work.

Baba abhors religious fanaticism and respects holiness wherever he sees it. He is himself a man of strong personality who enjoys life, has a fine sense of humour, puts in many hours of work every day despite his poor health. He has won many awards for his pioneering work in leprosy, which to him is a way of being with the lonely and the lost. Recipient of many other honours for other work, these honours rest lightly on this shoulders. He likes to meet people and is particularly fond of the youth. His face reflects compassion when he is talking to someone in misery or pain. His enthusiasm is infectious. He loves music and some of India's greatest musicians are his personal friends. He loves to play with children.

Such a man is Baba. How shall we describe him? Indian society honours its most beloved servants with spontaneous titles. Gandhi was described as 'the living truth'. Nehru was described as a man 'pure as crystal'. Tagore was described as the 'leader of Indian Renaissance'. Baba can best be described as 'the impatient visionary'. He has lived in the pursuit of a vision—a vision of an India where everyone lives in peace and dignity, where everyone's life is full of joy, hope and creativity.

Baba Amte describes his philosophy thus:

"I SOUGHT MY SOUL, MY SOUL I COULD NOT SEE;
I SOUGHT MY GOD, MY GOD ELUDED ME;
I SOUGHT MY BROTHER AND I FOUND ALL THE THREE."

IV

SEWA—Women's Struggle for Dignity

"The slaves of ancient times did not know that they could be free. The mental condition of the Indian women today is very similar. When the slave was free, for some time he felt uncomfortable thinking he had lost his support. Women have been taught to believe that they should regard themselves as slaves of men. It is necessary that women are made to understand their own dignity, their own complete equality with men and to participate in all social activities. Once we resolve to achieve this kind of mental revolution, it is quite easy to accomplish it. Any foreigner who examines our society dispassionately will admit that the laws and the customs confer on our women a very inferior status. This is fundamentally wrong and it will have to be fundamentally altered. This inferior status given to women led to a situation where our efforts at social reconstruction of the Indian society always remain incomplete, and our activities become lifeless."

— Mahatma Gandhi in his two books: *Constructive Programme* and *Tyagamurti* (in Gujarati)

The story of the SEWA movement can be traced directly to Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi had come back to India in 1915 after his struggles and triumphs in South Africa. After his successful Champaran *satyagraha* in Bihar, Gandhi had settled down in his ashram at Ahmedabad.

The textile mills were an integral part of the industrial

revolution in India. This revolution was accompanied by the same adverse social conditions that arose when the West was embarking on a similar transformation. The wages were poor, the working hours long, the conditions of work exhausting and the living quarters ugly and squalid. The *chawls* or the slums in which they lived were heavily overcrowded and there was an atmosphere of degradation. All these workers were the landless peasants whom poverty had uprooted from their villages and driven to the towns to earn a livelihood. Many of them found work in the ever-growing textile industry of Ahmedabad city.

In 1922, Gandhi led a strike of textile labourers demanding better wages. The strike was successful. After the strike was over, Gandhi organised this textile labour into a labour union, and called it 'Majoor Mahajan', or the Textile Labour Association (TLA). This was the first Gandhian trade union in India and it has grown a great deal in strength during the last seven decades. It does not believe in class strife and has maintained a record of settling labour issues with the mill-owners without resorting to a strike or the threat of a strike, and, of course, without the use of violence.

SEWA is an indirect offshoot of this labour union--the Majoor Mahajan. Its founder—a trade unionist and campaigner for women's causes—is Smt Ela Bhatt, fondly known as Elaben. For many years she was in charge of the women's wing of the Majoor Mahajan. As such she was familiar with the problems of industrial labour and the advantages in organising them.

But her heart was elsewhere.

She had seen the degrading conditions of the women pulling handcarts in Ahmedabad city. "Who will organise such unorganised women in the city and in the towns and villages?" she wondered. These women rendered services to the people though their own lives were hard, their status low, their rewards paltry and their disabilities many. There

were literally many thousands of such self-employed women.

Elaben decided to organise a separate Self-Employed Women's Association, in short SEWA. She parted company with the Majoor Mahajan to accomplish the difficult task of preserving the dignity of the poor, self-employed women workers.

It is relatively easy to organise the urban workers of a modern industry. They work together, meet each other every day, face common problems during working hours, and their wages are uniform. All this makes them strongly conscious of the group to which they belong and are therefore, willing to be organised. In the industrial culture, labour unions are well organised, strong, and given due recognition. It is the labour unions which have made it possible for labour to get better wages and working conditions.

On the other hand it is not easy to organise agricultural labourers, rural artisans or the self-employed workers. These people do not meet often and tend to be isolated from each other. Those who are very poor are far too worried about their next meal and matters like organising themselves do not hold any immediate appeal for them. To organise themselves so as to secure better conditions requires a certain amount of determination and staying power which these people lack. The benefits of coming together have never been explained to them.

Self-employed men and women form a major segment of the poor and unorganised workers. They are the vegetable vendors, fruit hawkers, casual labourers standing near markets and bus-stands, rag pickers, waste paper pickers, handcart pullers, home-based textile printers, bead rollers, flower sellers, domestic workers, pavers, cobblers—in fact, thousands of men and women whom we see every day in the towns and cities, but whose plight makes no impact on us. These men and women earn an unsteady income. They work sometimes just to render :

service like strenuously pulling a handcart, or they produce an article mostly on contract for a trader who is often a moneylender also. They have no fixed hours of work, no fixed income, practically no business relationships, and no protection of a labour law. They are most often at the mercy of the traders who are the masters, far removed from the workers through a network of exploiting middlemen. Some workers in big cities have to face harassment by public authorities like the police. They are often asked to produce licences which they do not have or even asked to vacate the space they occupy on the pavement because they obstruct traffic.

An overwhelming number of the self-employed are women. These women also cannot unite and organise themselves partly for the same reasons as the men but, in addition, they have the handicap of being women. These women live and work precariously and being illiterate, their grasp of things is poor and they find contact with the world totally baffling. Their constant need for money drives them inevitably to the moneylender whose genius for exploitation is unmatched. Their need for cash is so great that they look upon such a moneylender as their saviour and feel obligated to him. In their struggle for existence, they get little support from their families and neither can they look elsewhere for support: theirs is essentially a lonely struggle!

Elaben was appalled by the sorry plight of the handcart-pulling women of Ahmedabad city. These women had been drawn from the neighbouring States of Rajasthan and Maharashtra. They had come just to make a living: any kind of living. Being tall and sturdy, they can pull handcarts containing cargo of various types— foodgrains, vegetables, household furniture, steel, metals, junk, old paper, boxes, crates, etc. In short, anything which requires a short haul of about five kilometres within the city. At the end of the day they are thoroughly exhausted and if they fall ill even for a day, their next day's meal becomes uncertain.

Unbelievable as it may sound, many of them are back at work on the seventh day after delivering a baby. They carry the child in a little hammock which is normally hung just below the cart.

Elaben thought: "Should they continue to work like this? Can something be done to improve their situation?" Starting out single-handedly, Elaben organised a few young, dedicated, highly educated women who were willing to work hard without any expectations of a reward for a cause they believed in.

They founded the Self-Employed Women's Association in Ahmedabad in the year 1969. It is called SEWA, in short it means "service".

They started meeting the women, individually and in small groups. In the group meetings, these women were encouraged to express their problems freely. All of them collectively tried to find solutions to their problems.

The problems indeed were many and baffling. But Elaben and her team of organisers listened and met these women in their homes to get a first-hand feel of their day-to-day lives. Eventually they were able to identify the problems and then proceeded systematically to find the solutions.

Their problems were many: abject poverty, illiteracy, lack of information and lack of skill. Traditional jobs by unskilled women are often lowly paid. Usually it is the men who take up skilled or semi-skilled jobs and earn more. This shuts out the possibility of women getting well-paid jobs and improving their skills, which in turn leads to stagnation. When they are producers of goods which are to be supplied to a single master, tremendous exploitation occurs: their per piece rates are low, the raw materials supplied by the master himself are high priced, and a part of the final goods are unreasonably rejected. They are unable to buy raw materials at reasonable rates. Examples of such raw materials are bamboo poles for basket weaving, tendu leaves and tobacco for *beedi*-rolling, colours and dyes

for textile printing, textile-mill waste for making quilts, rags for making dolls and so on. These women who produce goods have no other place but to work in their own homes, which are single room tenements and inconvenient. They possess very little knowledge of how to market their goods or services for a good profit. For this, there are two major reasons: firstly, they have to earn every day and cannot afford to wait; secondly, they do not have access to distant markets owing to difficulties in transportation and storage.

This apart, cultural factors and family responsibilities prove further hurdles in their work. Working mothers need strong support to take care of their children while they are busy with their work. Such support can be given by creches where young children can be left in the care of a trained and efficient person. Such creches are not available to them. This compels them to keep the children with them or to neglect them.

Irresponsible behaviour of menfolk, like getting drunk, creates severe disturbances in the family. Several social customs in India are silly and oppressive, but very few, even among the young, have the courage to revolt against them. Generally it is the women who have to suffer in many ways as a result of such customs. When food prices are high and there is not enough to go round for the family, it is the woman who eats last and gets the least. This poor nutrition in combination with the hard work that they do makes them ill.

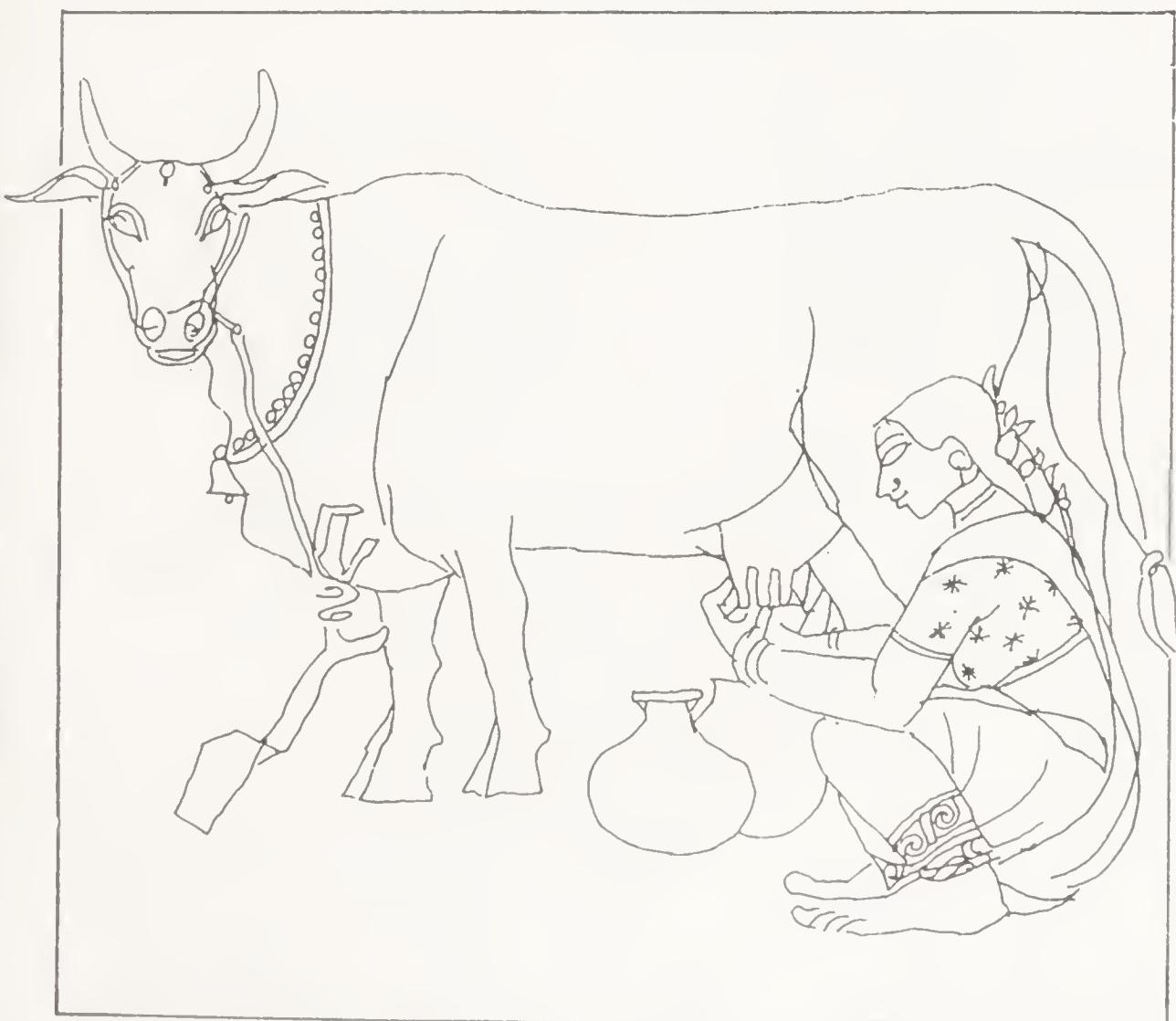
In the city slums these women are often harassed by slum lords and local ruffians. In India the caste system is still very strong and these women who belong to low castes suffer from caste prejudices which bar them from better work. To fetch water and to get firewood is often a woman's responsibility and this adds to her burden. When ill, she has no proper treatment and when pregnant she has no continuity of medical attention. They are aptly described as "poor, powerless and often pregnant".

Once these problems had been identified, SEWA decided to plan the strategy of work. They identified the women's problems: some problems were common while some were specific to a small group of women engaged in a particular occupation. Each group in SEWA was asked to work on that group's primary problem. As a first step, a relationship of trust was built up between the SEWA leaders and the group of women through continuous dialogues and demonstrated commitment. Once the trust was created, women were willing to face all odds and obstacles.

The fundamental strategy of SEWA is to organise the women for a common struggle. This obviously hurts vested interests of private moneylenders, local slum lords, big traders, alcohol kings or petty politicians. Sometimes even public agencies are hostile to such organised groups. In such an event, the organised group has to find an effective way out to meet the economic threat. Very often, the solution suggests itself—formation of a co-operative. If credit is withheld by the hostile trader, again the solution suggests itself—formation of a bank.

How long can the leaders of the movement keep on handling the problem? If the women keep on looking to the leaders, it ceases to be a movement. The group members themselves have to develop self-confidence to tackle their own problems and to become self-reliant. Many years ago, when Mahatma Gandhi insisted that only women should manage a substantial fund raised in the name of his late wife Kasturba, he was told, "But they have no experience of managing such funds. They will make mistakes." Gandhi replied cryptically, "Let them make mistakes." The SEWA leaders worked on the same principle: let them make mistakes, but let them learn and let them be independent.

The entire self-employed sector has people who work independently. They do not have collective strength and cannot, therefore, influence the decisions of local authorities like panchayats, municipalities or the State governments.



(Top) Engaged in the back-breaking task of rolling beedis.

(Bottom) A milch-cow can be a source of livelihood for a woman member of a co-operative.



(Top) Starting one's own bank account with one's earnings.

(Bottom) Selling vegetables to become self-reliant.

Yet to improve their lot, the self-employed women have to compel these authorities to take notice of their needs and aspirations. In other words, they must create a lobby or a pressure group to influence policy. This can happen only if the leadership springs from these women themselves, though, to begin with they may need help from outsiders to give them strength and confidence. These catalysts from outside must be sensitive to the limitations and apprehensions of unorganised women workers, and must have conviction in their mission and the courage to stand up to vested interests. Above all, they must be prepared to wait patiently for official support which comes only after years of struggle and a demonstration of the organised strength of their workers. Almost as a rule such outside leaders are women with a high level of education belonging to the urban upper classes who have to learn to establish that they are willing to accept the illiterate poor women as equals, while striving to obtain justice for them. Besides the capacity to learn and listen, they must have the tenacity to withstand and not leave after a short period, and be willing to stay and work till the goal of creating a self-sustaining organisation is achieved.

SEWA was started as an urban organisation in Ahmedabad city, but it was inevitable that its message and its activities would spread far and wide.

One of the earliest struggles was of the women who rolled *beedis*, which are smoked by men of low economic strata. The *beedi* is made from a dry leaf of tendu tree, in which some low quality tobacco is rolled and the two are kept together by a string tied at one end. It is a work requiring low skill and is always entirely done by women who work in their own homes. They collect the leaves and the tobacco from the trader in bulk and deliver the finished *beidis* in units of thousands after every few days. The trader does not employ them in any formal sense; he merely pays them on piece rate basis—a certain amount per thousand *beidis*. He often rejects a portion of the *beedi* bundles

delivered by the women on flimsy grounds, but then takes these at lower rates. The women do this work only at home where the living space is barely enough to keep their pots and pans. Very young children, if they are around when loose tobacco is lying around, learn the habit of just picking up minute quantities of the tobacco and chewing it. Tobacco is a health hazard and children are thus exposed to it.

The *beedi*-making industry, though scattered over thousands of small homes and huts, is nevertheless a money-spinning industry. A few factories have come up in India which employ men and women under one roof, but essentially it is a cottage industry. In Gujarat, the industry is located in a big way in Ahmedabad city, but small clusters are found in a few towns and occasionally even in villages. The women engaged in *beedi*-rolling in Gujarat come from various communities. One group originally from Andhra Pradesh consists of women of the Padmeshali community and has been doing this work for decades. Another group is of Muslim women, both in Ahmedabad city and in smaller towns nearby, especially a town called Patan. A third group is of Koshti women. The urban women live in slums called *chawls*, and often their husbands and fathers are industrial workers. Many women who are widows or have been abandoned by their husbands are heads of their families and it is their income which supports the family.

The Government of India made laws to give these women certain minimum wages and free medical facilities. But the traders were strongly organised and they discovered methods of defeating such laws. A young and determined lady from SEWA, Renana Jhabwala, first studied the problem and then organised the women to demand what was legally their due. In such struggles, the traders first rely on rough words and then victimisation and intimidation. The women believing in their own strength, stood up to it all. This agitation in 1971-72 by the women *beedi* workers was successful and later, this

agitation came to serve as a model in other parts of India.

In 1974, there was an another struggle. This was of the Muslim women from Ahmedabad city engaged in making quilts and children's garments out of textile waste. The textile-mills of Ahmedabad produce waste pieces of cloth with the biggest being no bigger than a handkerchief. These waste pieces are locally called *chindis*. The *chindi* is classified according to size as big, medium and small. Again, they are classified into three categories based on appearance—clean, dirty, and very dirty.

The *chindis* are used for two purposes—the bigger ones are carefully sewn together to make cheap readymade garments for children, while the smallest pieces go into pillows and quilts as fillers.

The prosperous traders have created a monopoly system of purchase of such *chindis* in large quantities. They then farm out these *chindi* pieces to women who stitch the garments and make quilts in their own ill-lit and cramped homes and deliver the finished product back to the traders who pay them paltry wages. While the women's rewards were small, the traders flourished and earned large profits.

The answer to these women's problem was a co-operative. "Why not form yourselves into a co-operative? You can then collect the *chindi* yourself directly from the textile-mills, make and sell the garments and quilts through a co-operatively owned shop?" asked the SEWA leaders. The women responded with enthusiasm, but were soon to receive a shock. The traders had such a strong hold on the men who disposed of the *chindis* in the textile-mills that the women were deprived of the *chindis* altogether. However, their persistence broke this deadlock. From this point onwards, the rest was not very difficult. Nevertheless, they had to learn quite a few things—how to keep accounts, how to organise the transport of *chindis*, how to run a co-operative retail shop. But they were keen to learn and did learn. The work of organising these women is still going on.

Then two years later, there was the struggle of women who did block printing of cotton textiles. The story of their exploitation was similar. It was the trader who supplied everything—the cloth, the wooden blocks for printing, the mixture of colours which he kept a secret. The work involved the printing of the cotton cloth as per given designs and then the delivery of the entire product back to the trader. The printed cloth was used as bedsheets, curtain material, pillow cases, etc. The women's wages were low and again they had to work in their own dark, dingy homes. The women decided to organise a co-operative. They brought the cloth and the wooden blocks and through sheer perseverance discovered the various formulae for making dyes. Many women are now running co-operatives and even those who did not join these co-operatives get better treatment from their former masters.

In these three struggles, victory did not come easily. Many women had to face threats and victimisation and some of them succumbed to such pressure. On many occasions, the husbands and fathers of these women took strong objection to "the womenfolk from our families joining processions and public meetings." To form a co-operative society was easy, but to run one was not that easy: they did not know accounting and had no skill in handling commercial transactions. It was always very difficult to deal with public authorities like government officials and the police. If handcart-pulling women wanted to own their own handcarts, they had to have a licence and this involved going to the police whom they feared. A co-operative's accounts had to be audited and certified by officials. If the police filed a case, they had to face the court system which was baffling in its procedures and delays. They did not understand the banking system nor the commercial world. The process of learning was very slow. They stumbled often but did not falter.

Then came the epic struggle of the vegetable vendors in Ahmedabad city. Unlike the hawkers who are mobile

and travel long distances, the vendors just sit in one place on the pavement to sell their wares. In big cities vendors on the pavements are a familiar sight. The vegetable vendors cannot afford to take regular accommodation in an organised vegetable market on rental basis because of high rates and shortage of space.

Economic necessity coupled with serious shortages of accommodation compelled a great many men and women to sell their goods on pavements, street corners, railway platforms, beaches and even public parks. These vendors were often subjected to harassment by petty police functionaries who demanded bribes, spoke rudely and always ill-treated them. All of a sudden one day the town authorities decided that these women were obstructing vehicular and pedestrian traffic and should, therefore, be removed. But where could they go? They came to SEWA for help. SEWA in turn organised them and the struggle started.

The town authorities who thought it easy to remove these women, were surprised to see their organised resistance. SEWA first explained the plight of these women to the authorities. They were poor, yet they rendered an essential service. They had to sit at a place where the buyers came easily and in large numbers. To push them away would harm the interest of the customers and ruin the business of these women. SEWA also made it clear that the women would readily shift their business into the regular vegetable market if they were assured accommodation at a reasonable rent. This promise the town authorities did not make. They said vaguely, "We will look into it." The women refused to accept this kind of a vague answer which is so readily given but has no real meaning. SEWA took the matter up to the Supreme Court and won the case. The municipal authorities were ordered by the Supreme Court not to remove these vendors until they were provided alternative accommodation in the regular markets.

After considerable work in the urban areas of Gujarat, SEWA's work started spreading to the rural areas as well. In a village called Dev Dholera, rural women engaged in making simple broomsticks and cheap baskets, had no opportunity to improve their skills. SEWA made a bold plan to get master craftsmen from north-east India to teach them new skills. They soon learnt to make decorative bamboo articles, lamp shades and other attractive things which could fetch much better prices for them.

The dairy industry has always been regarded as a man's domain. Although in the traditional culture, all the work relating to cattle is done by women, the men corner the proceeds of the dairy products. Even dairy co-operatives in Gujarat had only men as members. It was taken for granted that women cannot start a milk co-operative. SEWA took the initiative and succeeded in forming rural women's dairy co-operatives.

Gujarat State is prone to severe droughts as a result of frequent failures of the monsoon. For four consecutive years of 1984, 1985, 1986 and 1987, rains eluded large areas in northern and western Gujarat. This four-year drought has been regarded as the worst drought of the century. At such times it is the poor who suffer the most, because their livelihood as agricultural labourers depends solely upon their being able to get some agricultural work. They have no other source of income. In dry and parched farms there is no work. These desperate families are compelled to migrate to the towns and the cities and live on pavements, in squalid slums, public parks, below bridges and on railway platforms. Always hoping to return to their villages during better times, many families get permanently uprooted from the villages and are compelled to live in poverty in the city. This influx to the already crowded cities makes urban life totally chaotic. Cities become sick and begin to disintegrate. It is in such cities that these resourceless and baffled migrants have to live.

SEWA agreed to work in the drought-stricken areas.

Through the women of the villages, SEWA distributed fodder and foodgrains on a large scale. SEWA also insisted that the fundamental causes of the drought must be clearly understood and explained thus to the village women: "The trees are going, the grass is going, the land is getting hard and yields little. When the monsoon fails, we, the women suffer the most. The drudgery of fetching water and fodder is getting intolerable." The message was clear: the drought will come again and make the area into a desert. "Let us plant trees, shrubs, grasses. Let us protect them." SEWA gave the basic guidance and the essential leadership to the women for social forestry projects.

SEWA has members from various communities. In Gujarat communal violence and rioting flared up twice in the late seventies and early eighties. This was largely confined to Ahmedabad city. Such violence disrupts the lives of both Hindu and Muslim women. The women of both the communities decided on joint action to combat this communal frenzy. In Elaben's words: "The women surrounded their own frenzied husbands and fathers and restrained their hands."

SEWA knows the importance of exchanging ideas, sharing experiences and collective thinking. This is best done by women meeting in small groups and holding discussions as often as they can. Such free discussions enable the women to come close to each other, build mutual trust and confidence, and become mutually supportive. Such frequent meetings ensure that they develop the ability to work together for long periods of time until they succeed. Another important means of communication on which SEWA relies is the video movie. Uneducated women have been trained to handle video equipment and take movies showing the women at work, their working conditions and their problems, their hopes and their determination to organise. Video movies make communication of a message easy.

SEWA has, on different occasions, championed the

cause of the rural women who gather firewood from the hills, of women deserted by their husbands, of women who have demanded that there must be proper toilets for them to ensure decency and privacy. SEWA has campaigned against wife-beating. It also runs a Gujarati journal *Anasuya* which frankly discusses the problems of the underprivileged poor women. The same journal now appears in Hindi from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh.

In recent years SEWA has set up branches in Haryana, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi and more such branches will soon be coming up.

The problems of underprivileged women throughout India are exactly the same: their grinding poverty, the tyranny of customs, their low social status, and lack of self-confidence. The promising work done by SEWA is an excellent model, with their leaders working with the poor women and motivating them to get fully involved in the process of their own betterment. Every obstacle is overcome with courage and every success is used to build morale. This is an unfailing strategy.

SEWA is a pioneering movement, of the women, by the women. It recognised that the value of the women's work goes unrecognised, that they have little control over their own incomes, that they have little power to decide the course of their own lives. Whether as wives or mothers or daughters, customs and their life situations compel them to be dependent on others throughout their lives. They have great reservoirs of inner strength and capability for sustained work but society regards them as weak and vulnerable.

SEWA has tried to change all this. To the women who were timid, diffident and powerless, SEWA has imparted courage, confidence and control over their own lives. SEWA's success should compel the whole society to fundamentally alter its age-old judgment of women.

V

Conclusion

"My work will be finished if I succeed in carrying conviction to the human family that every man or woman, however weak in body, is the guardian of his or her self-respect or liberty. This defence avails, though the whole world may be against the individual resister."

— Mahatma Gandhi

These three movements, in three different parts of the country, are outstanding examples of voluntary work inspired by the example of Gandhi. They show that organised and determined groups can create awareness, generate self-confidence, overcome obstacles, and make lives better. They are models of the achievements of ordinary people who have no political platform. There are similar though smaller movements in all parts of India: although smaller and less well known, they are yet doing vital work. These show what people can achieve through secular non-political voluntary work. Reliance on small groups dynamics is a major reason for the success of these movements.

What is small groups dynamics ?

As a rule, small groups work better than large groups. A small group has certain clear advantages. Everyone knows everyone. There are strong personal bonds. Conflicts are few and compromises are reached quickly. Everyone participates in the common task. Every person is accountable and cheating is rare. A small group gives each

individual a sense of purpose and a sense of personal worth. The primary strength of a small group is its flexibility. Small groups foster a sense of freedom coupled with a sense of belonging.

Such small groups in order to make impact will have to maintain close contacts, exchange ideas, share experiences, build up a network and lend support to each other. In short, they will have to think globally, but act locally.

It is important to understand the leaders of these movements. They are basically 'outsiders'. Although educated, politically conscious, culturally different and not subject in their private lives to the pressures of poverty, these leaders understand the people. They do not believe in charity flowing downwards to passive recipients. They encourage the people to participate, to think for themselves and to express their views freely. There is no preaching, no exhortation; only commitment and personal example. There is no undue solemnity nor any vanity; only determination and conviction.

Volunteers can show remarkable achievements in fulfilling a whole range of human needs. There are, indeed, several groups working in many areas like income generation and poverty alleviation, welfare of the physically disabled, mother and child-care programmes, housing for the poor, water management, urban sanitation, environmental protection, fighting pollution, tribal welfare, consumer protection, anti-dowry campaigns, communal harmony, spread of scientific ideas and combating superstition, adult literacy, non-formal education, care of abandoned and neglected children, juvenile delinquency, Lok Adalats, anti-drug and anti-alcohol work, and national integration.

Voluntary work can be done by anyone with the right motivation. What a volunteer needs is a clear understanding of the problems and a commitment to work. Above all, he must win the trust of the people with whom he works.

D. K. Oza (b. in 1933 in Gujarat), aware of being born in a very dry region, had decided early in his boyhood to do something to make the land of his birth greener. He hoped to be a conservationist. During his early teens he enjoyed reading Mahatma Gandhi's periodicals, especially *Harijan Bandhu* and *Harijan Sevak*—these journals, though discontinued in the fifties, left an indelible impact on his mind. After graduating from the Gujarat College in Ahmedabad, he joined the Administrative Service in 1957 and a year later left for Tamil Nadu to settle there. During 1987-88, he took leave from work to see for himself the voluntary movements of the 'Chipko' activists in the Himalayas, of Baba Amte in Maharashtra and of Smt Ela Bhatt in Gujarat. Since 1990, he has been working as Vice-Chancellor of the Gandhigram Rural Institute in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu.

This book, addressed primarily to the youths, is a lively narration of the author's experiences and observations of three voluntary movements—one by the Chipko activists for conservation of forests, the other two by Baba Amte against leprosy and by Smt Ela Bhatt against exploitation of women workers respectively. There is a short chapter on Mahatma Gandhi, which has been written with care but great hesitation because Gandhiji's personality is so fascinating that it is not an easy task to describe him.

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